

COMPASSIONATE RESILIENCE: A MEETING OF ELITE SPORT AND COACHING MINDSETS

Laurence Cassø Halsted introduces the concept of compassionate resilience, and shows us how we can apply ideas from elite sport to the way we manage and coach our teams in the workplace.

The world of high-performance sport has entered a period of reckoning. The traditional approach, centred around a result-focused, win-at-all-costs culture, has led to shockingly frequent cases of abuse and inhumane treatment of athletes. British gymnast and Olympic bronze medallist Amy Tinkler said that she would give her medal back if it meant she didn't have to go through the brutal system that led her to it. There is something very wrong with the culture of sport when medals and results are valued far above the health and growth of the athletes.

The effects of this approach are plain for all to see – burnout, dropout and a high prevalence of mental health issues among elite athletes. The toll on the athletes, and in many cases also the coaches, is elite sport's enduring shame, but it also represents a huge inhibitor on achieving the potential within the system. When one athlete drops out of their sport early due to overtraining or lack of support, their years of development and the impact of their continued engagement are suddenly lost. The results they could have achieved are no longer on the cards. Their impact on those around them and those that come after them is immediately lost. The unique personal growth that accompanies a long career in sport is sadly cut short.

The same trends are evident in the business world, where ambitions are high and performance and results matter most. Stress-related illness and sick leave is at an all-time high. Companies are struggling to motivate and hold onto their top talent. Younger generations are arriving with different expectations of their working conditions. They are impatient to make an impact in the world and are driven more by connection to a higher purpose than by the traditional remunerations. In both sport and business, traditional notions of mental toughness and resilience are being shown to lack substance. Those athletes and employees who do attempt to 'push on through' in the face of increasing stress and pressure end up suffering consequences.

The problem is that our definitions of mental toughness and resilience are no longer fit for purpose. Our understanding of the psychology of performance and of dealing with pressure has deepened. We have a host of new ideas about how to develop people, and how to create environments that encourage thriving rather than just surviving.

INTRODUCING COMPASSIONATE RESILIENCE

There is a paradigm shift coming in elite sport, centred around the creation of just these kinds of psychologically informed environments. An understanding of motivational theory and positive and performance psychology provides the foundation for cultures where people are supported rather than brutalised. Teams that are adopting this approach

are opening up a whole new world of performance gains, as athletes and coaches are trained to focus more on the process than the results, encouraged to be true to themselves, supported through the inevitable turbulence of a career in elite sport and motivated to stay longer in their sport. The concept of resilience, too, is being reconsidered. Through my experiences as an Olympic athlete and then supporting others at the highest levels of sport, I have come to an understanding of an idea that can best be described as *compassionate resilience*. This concept is founded on what are often regarded as 'softer' skills which, when put under the microscope, turn out to be the toughest of all.

There is a Buddhist parable that illustrates this nicely. The zen master asks his pupils what is tougher, the brick wall or the blanket? His pupils respond: the brick wall, of course. The master replies: 'And what happens to the wall when I throw a stone at it? It will chip. What happens when I throw a stone against the blanket? It absorbs the blow without damage.' The hardened mindset can withstand some stress but each blow will chip away at it, leaving it ever more unstable and, over time, liable to collapse. The more pliable mindset can absorb blow after blow without suffering substantial damage.

So what are the building blocks of this more pliable mindset that can lead to resilience of a deeper kind? Among them are self-compassion, mindfulness, gratitude and living by your values. This foundation of resilience represents our best understanding of psychology combined with wisdom from the ancient philosophies.

Self-compassion – treating yourself with warmth, kindness and forgiveness as you would do a close friend or family member – has been proven to mitigate the severity of post-traumatic stress disorder in military veterans. It has also been shown that self-compassionate people are more likely to pick themselves up and try again after experiencing failure. Self-compassion offers a deep sense of identity and self-worth from a place of security and acceptance, allowing for all the inadequacies and failures that come with being human.

Mindfulness is, simply put, being aware of your experience in the present moment without attaching judgement to it. It is the starting point for treating yourself with compassion in times of suffering and for not being swept away in destructive emotion or rumination. In a performance context, the practice of mindfulness is invaluable for developing greater focus and emotional control, which are at the core of dealing effectively with pressure.

Mindfulness meditation has long been an integral part of the mental training of top sports teams and athletes, such as the legendary Chicago Bulls team of the 80s and men's tennis player and world number one Novak Djokovic. Psychologist Viktor Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, writes: 'Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response.

In our response lies our growth and our freedom.' Mindfulness is the practice by which we can more skilfully navigate that space between stimulus and response.

Gratitude is an emotion, but also a thought that can be practised and a behaviour that can be expressed. It is a mental skill that can be trained over time and has been shown to be a buffer against stress, to decrease levels of depression, and to enhance feelings of social connectedness and positive emotions. On the physiological side, gratitude can have benefits to the cardiovascular system and to sleep, and has even been linked to greater neuroplasticity in the brain.

It is not about just thinking positively, but rather gaining a sense of perspective that can help you view challenging circumstances differently and in a way that helps you learn from them rather than be struck down by them. Australian researcher and author Kerry Howells has shown us how gratitude is also the antidote to resentment, the most toxic of emotions. Gratitude is a profound concept that can help us deal with the biggest hardships in life, heal broken relationships and live a more fulfilled life.

Living by your values and with integrity is advice that has been expounded ever since the time of the ancient Roman and Greek philosophers. A building with integrity can withstand the storm: similarly a person who builds their character on a foundation of integrity, being true to themselves and what they value in life, will be better equipped to weather the storms of life. It is a simple yet profound exercise to explore what your values are and how you can live and breathe them in your daily existence. They can help guide you in decision-making and bring a sense of inner stability and security. A lived sense of integrity means you will have clearer boundaries and will not so easily be drawn outside of them to behave in ways you later regret.

PUTTING IT INTO ACTION

Pulling this all together, we can begin to grasp the enormous potential impact of this new, more humane approach to developing resilient people and teams. This approach turns out to be the most impactful, helping people access deeper reserves of self-worth and to connect more meaningfully with others and with their sense of purpose in the world. In sport we are seeing teams and athletes using this approach to perform far beyond expectations – from the all-dominant New Zealand All Blacks rugby union team cultivating a powerful sense of belonging and purpose, to British tennis player Emma Raducanu prioritising her mental health to pull out of Wimbledon only to come back and pull off one of the greatest achievements ever witnessed in sport in winning the US Open from qualifying, on debut.

Businesses and leaders who are committed to high performance should take note. The traditional results-focused approach is being shown up as severely lacking in the world of elite sport, and the same goes for the workplace. A new frontier of performance gains lies in the unleashing of human flourishing. This work, however, cannot be done in a single day. It requires greater time and energy commitment from all parties, and that means true appreciation and prioritisation from an organisation's leadership. Those who are willing to commit to this path will reap the benefits: a more resilient workforce that suffers less from stress and can do better, more creative work, and one that has higher motivation, greater retention of talent and an overall spike in performance for both individuals and teams.

For those now wondering how they might get started down this path, let's use the two sporting examples above as inspiration. Evoking the legendary culture of the All Blacks, you may start by

considering how the onboarding process in your business can make people feel like they truly belong there. Can you show them, in vivid language, how their contribution will connect to achieving the higher purpose of the organisation?

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Turning to the remarkable example set by Emma Raducanu, perhaps you can be on the lookout for those moments when giving your team or an individual employee a break might be the step back they need in order to make a big leap forward later. In sport we are abundantly aware of the importance of rest and recovering, and of the threat of overtraining. How do you plan recuperation into the schedules of your employees?

Raducanu showed us that a teenager competing at only her second major could come through qualifying and win every set on the way to outright victory by embracing her love of the sport and focusing on each shot, each rally, one at a time. If you want your team or business to reach higher than ever before, consider how to unleash more of their intrinsic enjoyment of the work they do and especially how to get every team member focused on the process of their performance, with little care for the result.

I'm sure that all sounds near impossible for many reading this but, then again, true high performance is reserved for those willing to try and to fail.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Laurence Cassø Halsted is a two-time Olympic fencer who competed for Team GB in the London 2012 and Rio 2016 Olympic Games. After retiring as an athlete, he became the performance director for a national governing body as well as director of mentoring at non-profit The True Athlete Project. He is now bringing the cutting-edge approaches that he learned from his experiences in sport into the business sphere as a performance consultant and coach.

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