

Let's expand sporting culture

IN BUSINESS management theory, one of the most important requirements for a high-functioning team is that the team must be bound in two crucial respects — purpose and membership.

A bound purpose means that every person on the team, from its leader to its "foot soldiers", must share the values and mission of the team, knowing what they are doing and, more importantly, why.

Binding membership means that the identification and selection of the team is unambiguous, which provides both security and a clear path into a team.

When political forces change the selection of sports teams, membership security is eroded. That's not to say that athletes should be coddled and made to feel that they are eternally secure — part of driving a high-performance culture is beneficial competition for places.

But even then, membership is earned according to some invisible, accepted "code", and it is this code that clumsy (and sometimes insensitive) transformation policies violate, leaving few satisfied, regardless of which side of a quota a player happens to fall.

That said, transformation is vital. As I wrote last week, it makes no sense to compete against the world with only 20% of your viable, potential world-class talent.

This is what we do in South Africa, by virtue of a history that afforded only a small group of people the opportunities necessary to develop sporting excellence. If we

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are to remain competitive, we simply have to find ways to extend those same opportunities to more South Africans, in order to expand that culture of sporting excellence.

And therein lies the key — culture. If there is a single common thread that runs through the world's great sporting teams — New Zealand rugby, Indian cricket, Barcelona and Ajax's football academies, Kenyan running — it is culture. Culture in sport becomes part of the "DNA".

It provides aspiration and belief ("Everyone is succeeding, why not me?"), which inspires more children to commit to excellence — they select the sport, not the other way around. Culture ensures that mistakes made become lessons learned, and cultivates the expertise necessary to guide world-class performance. When parents send their talented rugby-playing son to Grey College, for example, they are hoping that he will benefit from the culture of that school, which has produced so many Springboks.

If one accepts the crucial value of culture, then it's difficult to see how fast-tracking transformation with



ROLE MODEL: Sir Richard Branson can teach us a thing or two about running sports like a business
Picture: CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES

quotas can possibly work. It takes many generations to develop culture, because it is inherited from

parents and handed down and across by teachers and peers. Quota systems may eventually create a

large enough body of parents and teachers who can sow a culture among youths, but this will take a long time.

What we need, then, is not a balance-sheet mind-set to the demographics of our sports teams, but rather the acceleration of culture creation within each sport.

This can be done in part by recognising that sports are "products" which are vying for a share of our talent pool in much the same way as Audi and BMW are vying for a share of your wallet.

This of course begs some questions: do we even have the necessary athletic talent across all race groups? If yes, where are they going? As I explained last week, we never collect this information, leaving us to guess, and our sporting "products" to lose.

I often wonder how transformation would look if Steve Jobs or Richard Branson were in charge — would they tap into creativity, marketing and business concepts to promote participation and create aspiration in the sport?

I suspect so. We then need to recognise the value of time — I believe that change takes at least three generations.

One generation makes mistakes, the second learns from them, and the third begins to benefit from the changes. Unfortunately, we keep returning to step one because we have not professionalised sports to the point where there are run like businesses.

Perhaps Branson is available.

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