



ARE YOU ACHIEVING YOUR FULL POTENTIAL?

Tips from track star Usain Bolt

By Professor John Weeks and Fellow Jean-Louis Barsoux - July 2010

IMD

Chemin de Bellerive 23
PO Box 915,
CH-1001 Lausanne
Switzerland

Tel: +41 21 618 01 11
Fax: +41 21 618 07 07
info@imd.ch
<http://www.imd.ch>

ARE YOU ACHIEVING YOUR FULL POTENTIAL? | Tips from track star Usain Bolt

Are you achieving your full potential? If you feel the answer is no, be encouraged. The fastest man in the world was also in the same boat at one point in time.

Usain Bolt is a phenomenon. Just 23 years of age, he is far and away the fastest man on earth, having established a number of world records. Last year, Bolt and his coach Glen Mills were on the IMD campus to share insights on motivation with a business audience. On July 6th, he will return to IMD to speak about the principles to sustained success. The following are 10 tips that can be gleaned from Bolt on how to translate potential into achievement.

1. Get help

Bolt had shown enormous early promise, but by the time he met his coach he had become an injury prone underachiever. Mills overhauled his training program to improve Bolt's strength but also to protect a congenital spine defect that was the root cause of his recurring hamstring injuries. Finding the right coach or mentor is critical for anyone who wants to improve. In a recent Fortune article, Google CEO Eric Schmidt reckoned that the recommendation to 'hire a coach' was the best piece of advice he ever received – not because the coach can do it better than you, but because he or she helps you to know yourself, face your weaknesses and decide where to allocate your efforts.

2. Forget entitlement

Mills helped Bolt to understand that his physical talent was no guarantee for success, unless accompanied by the requisite mental strength and discipline. To reach the top in any field, natural talent is a necessary but not a sufficient condition. It is the same for aspiring leaders who assume they will 'make it' on the strength of their brains and ambition. We meet too many high potentials who aspire to high leadership, but are used to rewards for being bright and creative. This breeds a sense of entitlement that is incompatible with the need to work on their weaknesses and continue learning.

3. Fight deafness

Remain receptive. As successes accumulate, it is easy to get carried away. The fun-loving Bolt

chose a trainer renowned as a strict disciplinarian, knowing that Mills would help him stay focused on the task. Bolt understood he needed someone to keep him honest. It's the same for executives: as they accumulate successes, they can grow hard of hearing or even deaf. Maintain contact with people who will keep asking the awkward questions.

4. Learn to lose

Bolt learned the hard way that: 'You have to learn how to lose before you can learn how to win'. That means discarding that crippling fear of failure. As Bolt puts it, once that fear is gone, then you can focus on the positive and you can play to win. Management scholar Chris Argyris noted a similar challenge for fast-trackers in organizations. He found that the psychological make-up of smart people paradoxically made it harder for them to learn. Having rarely experienced failure, they had not properly learned how to deal with the embarrassment and sense of threat that accompanies it. When they encountered failure, it triggered defensive routines that inhibited learning.

5. Build resilience

Mills also instilled in Bolt the idea that injuries are part of the game when you are pushing your body to its limits. They are to be expected – and even welcomed as part of your development. Injuries help to build mental resilience. They provide an opportunity to correct weaknesses, but also to reflect on the things you are doing right. Similarly, for executives who are stretching to the limits of their capabilities, it is impossible to avoid setbacks and even the odd derailment. Setbacks can help individuals identify what they truly value and who they truly trust.

6. Forestall stress

Bolt shows no signs of nerves as he prepares for a race. On the contrary, he likes to entertain the crowd with his antics. The pre-race routine helps to take his mind off stress and to gain a sense of control over his environment. Where anxious rivals see the pressure of expectations from the packed crowd, Bolt sees support. He believes that 'the crowd is your friend.'

Executive life is replete with potential stressors including difficult relationships, job uncertainty, travel obligations, unrealistic deadlines and sudden changes. To progress, executives have to learn to reframe or shut out those stressors .

7. Remember the goal

To push himself through punishing training sessions, Bolt keeps his eyes on the long-term objective. But he also knows that come the training session, he won't want to do it. So he has given Mills the permission to force him to do it. Numerous studies have shown that people are really bad at following through on things that they want to do in the long term, because they tend to discount future benefits so steeply. Like Bolt, ambitious executives must forfeit immediate benefits in the interests of longer term goals. This might mean finding clever ways to save themselves from their own weaknesses – 'pre-commitments' that will help them to stick with an objective they might otherwise dodge.

8. Reboot the dream

After his stunning feats in Beijing, Bolt's new-found celebrity generated fresh distractions, including interviews, talk shows and celebrity parties. For a while, he lost his motivation to train, until a chance exchange with an old friend made him realize that his real dream was not to smash records but become 'a legend'. Similarly, there may come a time when executives will have to contemplate what will sustain their motivation, emotional flexibility and intellectual vitality in the future.

9. Keep it fun

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the ebullient Bolt is his sense of fun. He jokes about the hard work and the amount of effort, pain and discipline involved, but he projects an infectious joy that comes from doing something that he loves to do and having a purpose that he believes in passionately. Even the most routine jobs can be made more interesting by turning them into a game. The trick is to treat the component parts of the job as a series of challenges and then to set small goals. It is a question of identifying something that you want

to do a little bit better or a little bit differently, and then working on it incrementally.

10. Beware of overconfidence

Bolt left it entirely to Mills to decide whether he would double up in the 100m and 200m in Beijing or whether participating in the 100m would jeopardize his chances of gold in his specialist event, the 200m. As world record holder in the 100m, Bolt could have insisted on entering both events, but he realized that overconfidence might cloud his judgment. Executives also have to 'know their limits'. Typically, there is a stage in your advancement where the next challenge is 'way beyond' what you have done before. You need to recognize this discontinuity and not let the excitement of the challenge distort your judgment about the stretch required. The last thing you need is to sign on for 'mission impossible'.

Lessons from the fast-lane

Running flat-out is something that virtually everyone tries at some time. To be number one in the world, you have to be better than billions of people. Natural talent clearly rules, but at that extreme level of performance, the mental aspect is what makes the difference. It is about the ability to reframe injuries, failures and pressures as stimulants to learning, growth and the pursuit of excellence. Take the example of Bolt's compatriot, Asafa Powell. Although he has been the top performer in the world for several years – having won more sub-10 second 100m races than any other sprinter ever – he has yet to win a major championship.

John Weeks is Professor of Organizational Behavior at IMD. He teaches on the Orchestrating Winning Performance and Advanced Strategic Management programs.

RELATED PROGRAMS



ADVANCED STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT - <http://www.imd.ch/asm>

Driving sustainable business results

Program Director Arturo Bris

- For executives taking on new and significant leadership responsibilities, who are looking to sharpen their analytical skills and strategic leadership effectiveness – as business-unit, region, division, function or country leaders
- Prepare to boost performance at individual, team and business-unit levels
- Ensure that your organization is keeping ahead in a constantly changing business environment



ORCHESTRATING WINNING PERFORMANCE - <http://www.imd.ch/owp>

The global business program for individuals and teams

Program Directors Bettina Buechel and Seán Meehan

- For individuals and teams who seek the latest management thinking and practical, innovative solutions for their business
- Anticipate global business trends
- Boost your performance, broaden your perspectives and expand your global network
- Design the program that suits you