



Ten time Olympic gold medal winning swimming coach Jacco Verhaeren coaches Dutch swimmers to Olympic gold. What can business learn from this?



“No-one ever won a gold medal by just thinking about it.”

By Femke Vonk

Jacco Verhaeren



Lives with
Passion
Source of inspiration
Motto

Wife, two children
Swimming
Music
Choose and accept the consequences
Blue, surprising right?
Our rabbit hutch

Favourite colour
What did you paint last?

How do you create that killer instinct?

“It starts with a goal. At the top level that’s simple: the Olympic Games. You know from the start that you’ll be in a really competitive world. You have to be task-oriented to be able to train physically, technically and mentally. The mental aspect is especially important: Can you still produce your best when the competition’s at its toughest? If you can stand out from the crowd, step up to the plate exactly when the pressure’s most intense, then you can win.”

What do you need to succeed?

“A good plan, the ability to accept setbacks and tenacity. Top-class sportspeople stand out because of their behaviour, will power, efficiency and a complete, even merciless focus on their goal. Less successful athletes are easily distracted, when things go wrong, for example. Everyone suffers disappointments; you have to accept setbacks and overcome them by strength of will.”

How do you maintain focus and a positive mindset after a disappointing result?

“By showing people that this was perhaps not your best performance, but that it’s ultimately all about getting it all together exactly at the ‘moment suprême’. Highlighting sub-goals that motivate you – these can be quite minor – is important.”

What kind of coach are you?

“Positive coaching is vital. But as with swimmers, as with everyone, there are things that go well and less well. Of course you have to focus on what needs to improve, but primarily you have to emphasise the positive, people must be allowed to use their talents.

You must also avoid burdening people with things they would rather not do. The emphasis should be on pleasure – in top-level sport as well as in business – although you sometimes have to bite the bullet and do something you would rather not do. If you want to achieve something you have to work for it, make sacrifices, but you have to be convinced that it enhances your self esteem and furthers your ambition. Some people are not stretched enough. If someone has a great talent, it’s quite ok to encourage them. People can deal well with that kind of pressure, and it gives them a kick to discover just where their limits are.”

As a coach, what do you absolutely refuse to put up with?

“I can’t stand people who want something but refuse to make choices. This is part of wanting to be successful: you have to dare to make choices, and these choices have consequences for things you have to do and things you must avoid at all costs.”

What is important as a coach and what can business learn from this?

“Sport is a good example for business because everyday we’re involved in getting the best from people. You can use this metaphor everywhere in business for any aspect of it. If you are involved in organising a trainings camp abroad, our sportsmen and women begin a jetlag protocol to ensure optimal performance soon after arrival. It’s the same on their return. Quite frankly, I don’t see a businessman who has to travel to the other side of the world to make a momentous decision taking this into account. You can enormously influence optimal performance, even that of people who have to sit through mammoth meetings and travel extensively.

One example is nutrition: which foods make you tired, which foods make you fit. As yet a field that has been poorly exploited.”

All well and good, but this travelling salesman won’t win a Olympic medal.

“But the salesman and the swimmer both have a goal, have gold in mind, it’s that speck on the horizon, but no-one has ever won a gold medal by just thinking about it. It’s about all the steps in the process. And this is where sport can add value. It’s an illusion to think that top-class sportsmen are fanatically motivated and inspired every day. This poses the question: how do I trigger those who are setting off to undertake important work for me – selling, attending meetings, making decisions – to give of their very best, not just for the company but for themselves as well. If you can convince people that it’s also about them, it will give them that little bit of extra motivation.”

Is it about involvement?

“Yes. That’s why we get together with a team of experts and the swimmers, this gives a feeling of involvement. You must always look for connections between people that link them to the product, be it a pot of paint or a fast swimmer. Everyone connected with the product must talk to one another so that the product can reach it’s full potential. For examples, if someone from Sales talks to someone from R&D, one about how he’s selling it and the other about how he has tried to make the product stand out from the rest, this triggers a feeling of being more involved with the product, increases your interest in it. Let’s chase those profits...” ■