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What Leaders Can Learn from Training Like an Olympic Archer

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Summary.

The discipline of archery, with training that emphasizes purposeful practice, mindful focus, mental toughness, and adaptability, offers useful lessons for business leaders. Just as archers break the skill of using a bow and arrow to hit a target from distance into component parts, such as stance or aim, executives can break the task of “becoming a better leader” into specific, actionable, and manageable steps. Just as archers are taught to concentrate intensely and channel all their energy into the perfect shot through rigorous mental training, including meditation and self-talk, businesspeople can use similar techniques to develop transformative focus. Just as archers practice visualization and cognitive reframing to manage stress and maintain composure in challenging situations, leaders can also use scenario planning and self-talk to become more resilient. Finally, just as archers develop their ability to adapt to varying conditions—wind, light, and even their physical and mental state on a given moment or day—executives can try similar exercises to better prepare for the unexpected.

Of the many Olympic sports showcased in Paris in recent weeks, archery is not the most popular or widely watched. However, the discipline, with its emphasis on purposeful practice, mindful focus, mental toughness, and adaptability, provides some valuable lessons for today's business leaders.

In recent years, we have drawn from our respective areas of expertise — for Michael, leadership and management; for Juan Carlos, Olympic-level archery coaching — to identify four strategies from archery training that help accelerate executive development and tested our thinking with professionals from a range of industries and functions.

With training and discussion, we not only teach executives how to use a bow to hit a target with an arrow from a 50-foot distance but also why the building blocks of world-class archery will make them more successful leaders and how to take what they've learned back to their organizations. Archery training also has the virtue of being accessible to almost all participants in our leadership development programs, regardless of their experience or physical condition. Most make rapid progress, and many can even hit bullseyes.

Purposeful Practice

Archery coaches, like those in other sports, guide their athletes to engage in “repetitions with a purpose.” This doesn't mean simply shooting a lot of arrows. Instead, coaches rigorously deconstruct the overall technique into constituent elements, including stance, grip, draw, aim, release, and follow-through. They identify specific weaknesses in each element and structure practice sessions to focus on these areas. This targeted approach ensures every repetition contributes to the archer's development, maximizing training efficiency and effectiveness.

Executive development can work the same way. Here's how to do it:

- Deconstruct your leadership into core elements such as communication, decision-making, strategic thinking, and delegation, just as archers do their overall technique.

- Identify specific leadership skills needing development, like archers pinpointing weaknesses.
- Create targeted strategies for improvement, focusing on one aspect at a time, paralleling how archers concentrate on individual elements of technique.
- Seek regular feedback from peers, mentors, and team members, mirroring how archers receive coaching input.
- Assess progress systematically and adjust approaches as needed, just as how archers fine-tune their training regimen.

For instance, you might focus on enhancing your active listening skills in meetings or work on handing off work more effectively. Each leadership activity should become an opportunity for deliberate practice and improvement.

This approach transforms the daunting task of “becoming a better leader” into specific, actionable, and manageable steps that will allow you to build confidence and competence as you progress.

Cultivate Mindful Focus

Skilled archers demonstrate unwavering focus and mindful presence. Their coaches work with them to concentrate intensely and channel all their energy into the perfect shot, filtering out all distractions and irrelevant stimuli while remaining acutely aware of their body, emotions, inner dialogue, breath, and surroundings. They are able to achieve this flow state, where action and awareness merge, through rigorous mental training, including meditation and self-talk.

You can use similar techniques to develop transformative focus, enhancing decision-making, strategic thinking, and team relationships.

Here are some ways examples:

- Use positive self-talk, mimicking the types of “scripts” archers employ to maintain focus and confidence under pressure, such as, “Focus on what you have control over, and let go of what you don’t.”

- Strive to pay close attention to your thoughts, emotions, and physical sensations throughout the day, just as archers attune to their bodies and breath. When under performance pressure and stressed, don't try to fight it. Instead, breathe and say, "What I am feeling is normal and if I focus on what I know how to do, all will be well."
- Give complete attention to each task, whether it's strategic planning or team mentoring, in the way archers are fully engaged in each shot.
- Create distraction-free environments and designate "focus hours" to prevent interruptions during important work in the way that archers eliminate unnecessary external stimuli.

Enhance active listening, focusing entirely on your counterparts in conversations and meetings, modeling the same environmental awareness as archers. By honing these skills, you can cut through the noise of daily business life and direct your full attention to what truly matters. You'll also gain greater clarity of thought, emotional regulation, and an enhanced ability to inspire and connect with teams.

Build Mental Toughness

Mental toughness is essential for sustaining performance under pressure. In high-stakes competitions, an archer's mental resilience can make the difference between victory and defeat. So, coaches focus on developing their ability to manage stress and maintain composure in challenging situations through visualization, drills, and cognitive reframing. They practice controlling their heart rate and breathing, using positive self-talk, and developing pre-shot routines to center themselves. They learn to be ready for any surprises their coaches throw at them and embrace pressure as a positive force — an opportunity to excel rather than a threat to performance.

This same mental fortitude is crucial for business leaders who often bear the psychological burden of making critical decisions in high-pressure environments with consequences that can significantly impact their organizations, employees, and stakeholders. Developing mental resilience is not just beneficial but crucial for long-term success and well-being.

Archery-inspired ways to build mental toughness include:

- Increase confidence through deliberate preparation for challenging situations, including scenario planning and role-playing, just as archery coaches might make their athletes come from behind or finish in less time in a practice competition or teach them how to cope with the unexpected.
- Reframe setbacks as opportunities for growth in the same way that archers view missed shots or matches as valuable learning experiences.
- Practicing emotion recognition and regulation under pressure, just as archers control their nerves and maintain composure during crucial shots.
- Consider advanced stress management techniques, including progressive muscle relaxation, visualization of successful outcomes, and biofeedback training that archers use.
- Build a strong support network of trusted mentors, peers, or coaches to whom you can turn for advice and perspective, similar to how archers rely on their coaches and teammates.

Master Adaptability

Adaptability is the key to managing disruption, seizing unexpected opportunities, maintaining competitive advantage in dynamic markets, and thriving through turbulence. Coaches work with archers to develop their ability to adapt to varying conditions — wind, light, and even their physical and mental state on a given moment or day with a variety of tools, including training in different places, deliberately changing conditions mid-practice, mental rehearsals and visualizations of diverse scenarios, and biomechanical fine-tuning.

Here are some similar parallel exercises for leaders:

- Engage with diverse business scenarios through simulations, case studies, and cross-functional projects, developing an archer's capacity for adaptation.

- Create dynamic problem-solving exercises that require rapid strategy shifts, mirroring the cognitive flexibility training of archers.
- Use visualization to prepare for various business scenarios, such as how a pivot might play out, just as archers imagine how to shoot in different conditions.
- Regularly analyze and adjust your leadership depending on the situation, just as archers fine-tune their shots for different scenarios.

Hitting the Bullseye

These lessons from the archery range offer a fresh perspective on leadership development, emphasizing the integration of mental, emotional, and strategic skills. With training that emphasizes purposeful practice, mindful focus, mental toughness, and adaptability, you can elevate your performance and that of your team and organization.

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