

FROM BOAT TO BUSINESS

Leadership Insights From Britain's Elite Rowing Team

What business leaders share with one of
Britain's most successful team sports.



Contents

- 1 | Introduction
- 2 | Spark a Shared Purpose
- 3 | Build Team Cohesion
- 4 | The Power of Connection
- 5 | Vulnerability Is Key to Victory
- 6 | Do Not Fear Failure, Learn From It

Introduction

From boat to business, strong leadership can transform performance in elite sports, such as rowing, and organisations alike. Being an effective leader is about more than how smart you are or what experience you have. It's about what you do on the job and how you treat people. As we shall see, these qualities are key to winning medals and boosting growth.

The British Rowing team has built a strong reputation as an elite team, based on consistent success and dominance in the sport. They attribute their success to tough and ambitious training schedules, run by expert coaches and leaders applying the latest techniques in nutrition, physical training, and psychological preparation.

But medals aren't won on these attributes alone. For the team to have such sustained and impressive long-term success is a sign not only of great athletes in the boat, but of great leaders and a world-class approach to leadership outside of it. These leaders develop great athletes into the high-performing team who frequently finishes among the top contenders in international competitions, including the Olympics.

The coaches at British Rowing know that "elite" is not simply an adjective describing the best performers. It is a behavioural response to difficult or challenging situations. As Dan Moore, High Performance Coach with the men's British Rowing squad, describes, "Being elite is more than a mindset. It's a response. It's how you handle yourself and how you deal with situations as they arise. Nobody has the best all the time. When things aren't quite right, it's how you behave and make the best of it."

Credits: Benedict Tufnell for British Rowing.



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Dan Moore | British Rowing

Leadership is a uniquely human role, and its principles transcend the boundaries between sports and business. Recognising this, DDI, a global leadership company that helps organisations hire, promote, and develop exceptional leaders, has partnered with British Rowing to explore the commonalities in leadership across these domains. Matt Paese, Ph.D., Senior Vice President, Leadership Insights at DDI, explains that leaders are key to achieving results: “The secret to building a high-performing team is getting the right balance between the skills of their people and how those people work together.”

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To delve deeper into how leaders can drive success in both elite sports and organisations, Paese sat down with three elite coaches from the British Rowing team shortly before they headed to the 2024 Summer Olympic Games in Paris. He spoke with Dan Moore from the men's squad, James Harris, who works with the women's squad, and Nicola Benavente from the Para-rowing squad.

This report examines the parallels between leadership in elite sports, such as rowing, and corporate environments, drawing insights from both worlds to illuminate the universal principles of effective leadership. By exploring the strategies employed by British Rowing's top coaches alongside best practices in organisational leadership, we aim to provide a comprehensive view of how leaders can cultivate high-performing teams in any arena. Whether in a sleek racing shell or a lively office, the fundamentals of inspiring, guiding, and elevating team performance remain remarkably consistent. As we uncover these leadership strategies, we'll reveal valuable lessons that can be applied across disciplines, helping leaders in all fields to unlock their teams' full potential and achieve extraordinary results.

Spark a Shared Purpose

Shared purpose is the collective understanding of and commitment to a team's overarching goals and values. It acts as a unifying force, aligning individual efforts towards a common objective and infusing work with meaning beyond discrete tasks. When team members are united by a shared purpose, they exhibit higher levels of motivation, engagement, and resilience in the face of challenges. This alignment of vision and values not only enhances collaboration but also fuels innovation and drives sustained high performance.

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In today's dynamic business landscape, leaders need to transcend strategy and operational efficiency. They need to spark a collective ethos—a shared purpose that elevates each team and resonates through the fabric of the organisation.”

Matt Paese, Ph.D. | Senior Vice President, Leadership Insights | DDI

In elite rowing, a leader's ability to establish a shared purpose can significantly elevate the team's performance. By articulating a clear, compelling vision—whether it's winning a championship or breaking a record—the leader unites the rowers around a common goal, driving each athlete to push their limits in training, synchronise their efforts on the water, and persevere through challenges. It transforms individual rowers into a cohesive unit, where personal ambitions align with team objectives, fostering a powerful sense of camaraderie and mutual accountability.

Moore highlighted this galvanising effect, particularly when the team faces difficult challenges. He believes it plays a major role in making his team successful and helps them feel as though they are in it together.

“Reiterating the purpose and talking about the importance of each rower to the overall team makes a huge impact in getting through tough periods,” Moore emphasises. “They know they're doing it for a shared cause.”

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We see this in organisations, too. Leaders are often laser-focused on strategy and keeping the business running, but they must also inspire their teams and provide a clear vision, which serves as a guiding principle for team alignment and motivation. Everyone needs to understand why they're doing something and how it matters.

In organisations, leaders can spark purpose by aligning team goals with broader company objectives. This involves clearly communicating how each team's efforts contribute to the organisation's overall success. Leaders should regularly share business impacts and wins, helping team members see the tangible results of their work. Additionally, articulating the company's vision for the future and each team's role in achieving that vision can instil a sense of purpose and direction.

Effective leaders also ensure that purpose is not just communicated but lived. They model purpose-driven behaviour, make decisions that align with the stated purpose, and recognise and reward actions that embody the shared purpose. By consistently reinforcing the connection between daily tasks and the larger purpose, leaders can create a work environment where employees feel their contributions are meaningful and impactful. James Harris, High Performance Coach with the British Rowing women's squad, echoes this: “As a leader, I feel it is crucial to lead by example; this is the best way to encourage elite performance.”



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James Harris | British Rowing

This sense of purpose has a sweeping impact on employee engagement. Our *Global Leadership Forecast 2023* research found that purpose-driven leaders were 9X more likely to feel engaged in their roles. And when engagement runs high, retention flourishes. The same research also revealed that leaders who feel a strong sense of purpose are 2.4X more likely to intend to stay at their company for the next year.

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DDI | *Global Leadership Forecast 2023*

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Build Team Cohesion

Team cohesion is the invisible force that binds individuals into a unified whole, driving performance, innovation, and satisfaction. Effective leaders can be instrumental in fostering team cohesion through two key actions:

1. They must define clear roles for each team member.
2. They need to cultivate seamless collaboration across the team.

These complementary actions form the base of a unified team.

For British Rowing, role definition is paramount to success. Each rower must understand their specific position and responsibilities within the boat, whether they're setting the pace as the stroke or providing power in the middle. Clear roles ensure synchronised movements and optimal power distribution, which is crucial for achieving peak performance.

Nicola Benavente, High Performance Coach with the British Para-rowing squad, shared that “having clear roles gives individuals clear responsibilities. When you know who can help you within certain situations, or who you want to be surrounded by at a given time, it reduces friction within the team.”

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The same is true in the workplace. When team members have a clear understanding of their own roles and those of their colleagues, it reduces confusion and potential conflicts. Clear roles allow individuals to focus on their specific responsibilities, leading to increased efficiency and productivity. This clarity also better facilitates a stronger sense of purpose, as team members can see how their work contributes to business results.

By creating clear roles, leaders provide a foundation for trust, mutual respect, and seamless coordination within the team, ultimately strengthening team cohesion and effectiveness.

However, it is not enough for leaders to identify key performers and put them into clear roles. They also need to facilitate collaboration. Rowing is inherently a team sport where success depends on perfect synchronisation and collective effort. A collaborative team can better adapt to unexpected situations during races and push through pain barriers together. Strong collaboration enhances the team's ability to provide constructive feedback, share knowledge, and continuously improve their performance as a unit.

Collaboration is equally critical in the workplace, where complex projects and diverse skill sets necessitate effective teamwork. As Paese explains, "In today's hyper-connected business ecosystem, a leader's main responsibility is to build collaboration within their team. This isn't merely about fostering teamwork; it's about cultivating a symbiotic environment where different ways of thinking converge, propelling innovation and catalysing organisational resilience."

Leaders can cultivate this environment by creating structures and processes that encourage interaction and shared decision making. They should also model collaborative behaviour themselves and recognise collaborative efforts, prioritising collective contributions over individual competition.

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The Power Of Connection

Emotional intelligence is a cornerstone of effective leadership, particularly in how leaders communicate with their teams. The ability to understand, manage, and respond to emotions—both one’s own and those of others—can significantly impact team dynamics and performance. Leaders who employ emotional intelligence in their interactions create an environment of trust, open communication, and mutual understanding, fostering stronger connections and more productive relationships within their teams. This is vital—our *Global Leadership Forecast* research shows that when leaders did not view their company’s leadership as effective with interpersonal skills, they were 3.5X more likely to indicate they wanted to leave within the year.

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DDI | *Global Leadership Forecast 2023*

First-time leaders or leaders with less experience will often react to adversity by explaining, telling, and trying to find all the answers themselves. However, an effective leader can use emotional intelligence to tap into others’ motivations and create a shared understanding, especially in challenging situations. New leaders are often surprised to find that these “soft” skills aren’t soft at all. In fact, they can be more challenging to develop, but they have a greater impact on team success than focusing on problem solving alone.

For Moore, the biggest realisation in his career came when he discovered that “maintaining a problem-focussed approach to leadership will not lead to long-term success.” Moore characterises his early days in leadership as sometimes “barraging” his way through problems, being direct with his team by assertively confronting problems and imposing solutions on athletes to overcome them.

While this strategy worked for a while, Moore found that it limited his ability to get the most from his athletes. He realised that, ultimately, nobody can have all the answers and that there were better ways to pull maximum performance from talented players. Moore changed his approach. He placed more emphasis on communicating with the people involved and displaying emotional intelligence—making the effort to understand their motivations, how they were feeling, and their perspectives on key challenges. He realised he “didn’t need to be the guy with all the answers. I would get far better results by focussing on interactions with people.”

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By focussing on the people within his team, Moore could better understand them and the issues they were having. The key for Moore is that “when you’re trying to build a relationship, you’re trying to talk to somebody, not preach at them. You’re trying to establish a connection. Only then can you establish what the problem is.”

This enabled him to work more effectively with individuals to get to the root causes and then work on them together. This resulted in far better results for his team and for his own development as a leader.

New leaders often default to being killer problem solvers. This is understandable because often this has been a huge part of their success. However, connecting with team members, as Moore discovered, can be a bit trickier if you don’t know where to start. The DDI Key Principles offer an evidence-based framework that leaders can use to address people’s needs to feel understood, valued, involved, and supported.

DDI Key Principles



Esteem



Empathy



Involvement



Share



Support

By using the Key Principles to guide interactions, leaders can create a personal connection, encourage two-way communication, strengthen relationships, and build trust, all of which are key for successful communication between a leader and their team. As Harris puts it: “Communicating effectively is about understanding those you’re leading and building effective relationships in order to make the communication as productive as possible, and developing a consistency and trust with individuals you lead.”

There is a common misapprehension that skills like empathy and building trust are seen as “too soft.” But we consistently see in our research that effective leadership and organisational success hinge on leaders’ abilities to communicate effectively and connect with the people they lead. As Paese says, “The long-term success of organisations hinges on whether leaders can create and foster meaningful interactions with the people they lead.”

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Vulnerability Is Key To Victory

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Vulnerability is one of the most powerful yet counterintuitive leadership qualities. It is proven to strengthen trust and improve relationships with employees, while most leaders default to viewing it as a weakness.”

Matt Paese, Ph.D. | Senior Vice President, Leadership Insights | DDI

In business as in the boat, vulnerability is a powerful, if counterintuitive, trait that can have an enormous impact on team connection and trust in leadership. Nicola Benavente believes it is extremely important and that it starts with the leader: If I expect the athletes to be open and vulnerable to understand them best, I have to lead by example and show that sometimes we have off days, and that's okay. As a coach, it is easier to manage individuals when you understand where they are coming from. If I put a brave face on all the time or do not show that I too can make mistakes, they will copy this and this will limit what I can get out of them.”

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If I expect the athletes to be open and vulnerable to understand them best, I have to lead by example.”

Nicola Benavente | British Rowing

However, there are significant barriers to creating an environment where people feel comfortable enough to be vulnerable. One is the raw nature of a highly competitive environment. For British Rowing, this is heightened during the selection process for the Olympics, where athletes must show their strengths while masking any weaknesses. This has clear parallels in businesses, where members of the same team may be working toward the same promotion or opportunity for advancement.

Moore warns that trying to force vulnerability can have a negative impact because “the more you try and open up those doors, the more you find yourself ending up in this really weird halfway house—where it’s not real and it’s not real candour.” He explains that people will not want to show genuine vulnerability at certain times and you want people to feel they can share when they are ready. Whether sharing about the level of intensity, the environment, or the pressure, it’s critical for team members to find support and answers in those moments of vulnerability.

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Moments of genuine vulnerability are rare and cannot be forced. You must make the most of them when they arise.”

Dan Moore | British Rowing

Leaders are uniquely positioned to create psychologically safe environments for their teams. Teams with emotional security have high levels of trust and feel supported, comfortable, valued, and involved. At heart, team members must feel safe to take interpersonal risks. Unfortunately, most don’t feel this way. Only 31% of leaders say their direct managers promote an inclusive team environment, meaning that most lack psychological safety in the workplace.

Leaders can foster psychological safety by creating an inclusive environment that encourages open expression and by consistently practicing inclusive behaviours in both team and individual settings. Key strategies include checking in with team members, sharing personal stories, fostering discussion and curiosity, ensuring all voices are heard, and communicating both successes and failures.

Credits: Benedict Tufnell for British Rowing.



As Moore recommends, leaders can play a big part by demonstrating vulnerability themselves. When they do so, their teams are 5.3X more likely to trust them, and when they acknowledge failures or shortcomings, they were 7.5X more likely to maintain trust than those that did not.

Getting it right can have huge positive consequences, not just for individuals in the team but for the business. Our research shows that leaders who trust their senior leaders are nearly 3X more likely to develop novel ideas or solutions than those in low-trust organisations, and they are also less concerned with failing and try new ideas as an opportunity to learn.

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When leaders regularly display vulnerability, their employees are 5.3X more likely to trust them.”

DDI | *Global Leadership Forecast 2023*



Do Not Fear Failure, Learn From It

Even with a track record as impressive as British Rowing's, the team cannot win every time. When the inevitable happens and the team experiences failure, it is down to the coaches and leaders to guide the team and help them learn from it. This is particularly important when working with young athletes or high performers as they have rarely, if ever, experienced failure.

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Trust can break down quickly when people encounter failure. The key is to get ahead of it, minimise its impact, and use it to learn.”

Dan Moore | British Rowing

Moore admitted that he had found this area of coaching challenging. A coaching colleague provided a unique and clever method for addressing failure: proactively discussing the possibility of failure with his team ahead of a competition. The discussion would include steps they would take, reframing the failure or defeat as a lesson from which the team can grow.

Pre-empting failure and positioning it as a development opportunity not only prepares the team psychologically, but also offers a framework for how to deal with it. This is important because it gives focus and purpose to an emotional moment and wards off feelings of despair or loss of confidence.

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It's important to deal with success the same way you deal with failure. Review performance.”

James Harris | British Rowing

Harris echoes this, saying: “Defeat and failure are part of elite performance, and they are never easy to deal with. But it’s important to deal with success the same way you deal with failure. Review performance. What worked? What can be improved? What steps will you take to improve?”

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Even high-performing employees will miss targets from time to time. Great leaders know how to manage a wide range of reactions to failure and motivate people to get back on track.”

Matt Paese, Ph.D. | Senior Vice President, Leadership Insights | DDI

Leaders can create a team culture that values learning and growth over flawless performance. By emphasising progress over perfection, leaders remove judgement and shame and position feedback as collaborative, constructive, and vital to moving forward. Growth opportunities in success and defeat alike cultivate innovative approaches while keeping teams engaged.

Leaders can use the STAR method as a structured framework for giving specific, actionable feedback that team members can apply in future situations. To use this method, leaders should clearly describe the Situation and Task at hand, then detail the Actions taken, and finally discuss the Results or outcomes. When giving feedback for development, leaders can offer Alternative Actions and Results that point toward a different approach.

The STAR method is effective because it focuses not just on the outcome but on the entire process. By framing feedback in this way, leaders can help team members see failures not as personal shortcomings but as valuable learning experiences, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and resilience in the face of challenges.

Our research tells us that when team members receive feedback for growth and have opportunities for development, they are more engaged and likely to stay with an organisation long term.

Conclusion

Effective leadership is the compass that guides teams to excellence, whether in a bustling corporate office or in the water of an elite rowing competition. This report charts five key strategies that leaders use to forge high-performing teams:

1. Spark a shared purpose that motivates team members around a common goal.
2. Foster cohesion through clear roles and strong collaboration.
3. Use emotional intelligence to create a psychologically safe space.
4. Demonstrate vulnerability to cultivate trust.
5. Leverage failure into growth.

As we see in the success of British Rowing, these approaches enable leaders to cultivate teams that consistently exceed expectations and achieve remarkable results.

Yet even the most skilled leader can't control or predict every element. External forces—whether it's the weather conditions, water currents, market fluctuations, or technological disruptors—can also play a substantial role. That's why it is equally vital for leaders in elite sports, such as rowing, and organisations to be adaptable and stay focused on guiding their teams through unexpected challenges. By combining the five key strategies with a flexible, resilient approach, leaders can prepare their teams to not only perform at a high level under ideal conditions but also to navigate through uncharted waters and thrive amidst any circumstance.

About DDI

DDI is a global leadership consulting firm that helps organizations hire, promote, and develop exceptional leaders. From first-time managers to C-suite executives, DDI is by leaders' sides, supporting them in every critical moment of leadership. Built on five decades of research and experience in the science of leadership, DDI's evidence-based assessment and development solutions enable millions of leaders around the world to succeed, propelling their organizations to new heights. For more information, visit ddiworld.com.



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