

The Making of the Corporate Athlete

In our fast-changing world with ever-increasing demands and a focus on personal effectiveness and optimal performance, it's more important than ever that busy leaders and managers look after themselves and their teams physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually, in order to rise to the challenges ahead whilst maintaining wellbeing.

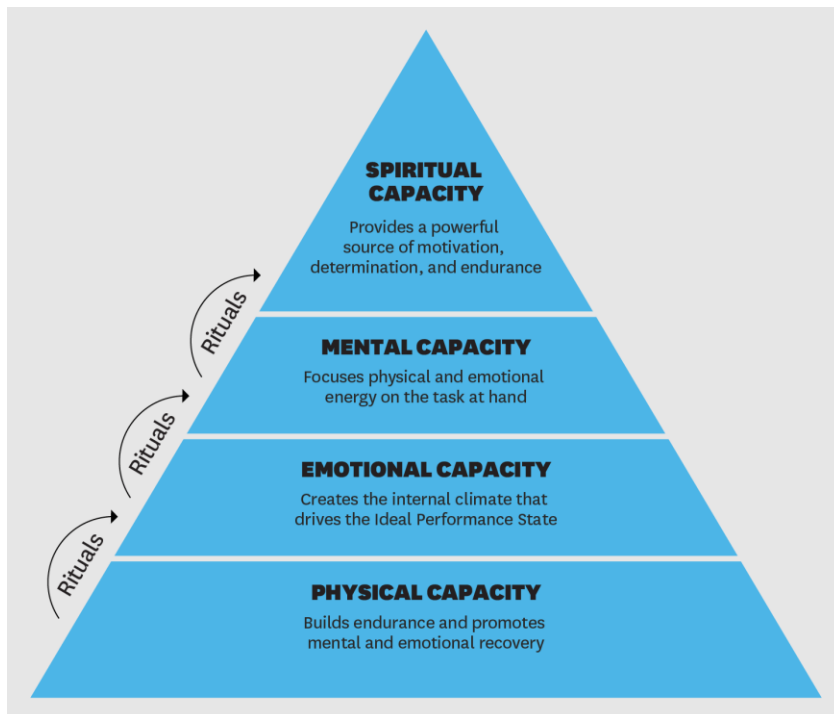
The concept of the 'Corporate Athlete' is an holistic approach to wellbeing and personal effectiveness that stretches across the four realms of body, emotions, mind and spirit.

Jack Groppe's book 'The Corporate Athlete' was first published in 1999, so this is not a new set of ideas, but they are ideas that deserve ongoing endorsement in the increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment that many of us find ourselves in. Nor is the concept one that only relates to those working in large corporate organisations. Anyone with a busy work life can benefit.

With decades of research and development into the peak performance of elite athletes, the key idea is that personal effectiveness does not come about through the development of skills and knowledge alone. Organisations cannot afford to address employees' cognitive capacities whilst ignoring their physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. 'Training' in the corporate sense (both the formal learning provided by an organisation, and the informal activities, habits and rituals that individuals engage in for wellbeing and personal effectiveness) need to address the whole person.

'The High Performance Pyramid' model illustrates that to perform at our best we need to develop strength and capacity across all four realms as follows:

1. Physical health as the foundation, then above that...
2. Emotional health, then...
3. Mental health and acuity, and finally, at the top...
4. Spiritual health, manifesting as a sense of purpose, motivation and endurance capacity.



Each level profoundly impacts all the others, and the ideal performance state is achieved when all four levels are working together.

If all this sounds a bit exhausting, there's no need to worry because one of the basic concepts is that **managing energy, rather than time, is the key to peak performance, and we need to oscillate regularly between energy expenditure and energy renewal to prevent burnout.** So it's ok to work hard if we are also taking care to balance this with appropriate levels of rest, play and other renewal activities.

Whilst the term Corporate Athlete may initially conjure up images of training for marathons or doing 40 mile bike rides in your off-duty time (alongside your already hectic working life), it needn't mean that at all. It's really about finding your level, whilst consistently taking small steps to develop strength and acuity across each of the four wellbeing realms - some examples including:

PHYSICAL

- Drinking water throughout the day
- Eating regularly (frequent small meals) and well (natural, whole foods)
- Avoiding too many toxins
- Sleeping well (early to bed, early to rise)
- Resting periodically (short breaks every 90-120 mins)
- Exercising regularly (high impact interval training is great – even 30 mins., 3-5 times a week)
- Having regular massages – particularly back/neck and shoulder for desk-workers.

EMOTIONAL

- Developing self-awareness – becoming aware moment to moment of what you're thinking, how you're feeling, how you're coming across, etc.
- Practising managing your emotional responses (controlled breathing, controlled thinking, focusing on what you want and choosing your response)
- Practising awareness of others – becoming aware of how others may be thinking, feeling, etc
- Up-skilling in the communication of your thoughts, feelings, needs and expectations
- Assessing and developing your emotional intelligence (excellent diagnostic tools are available, and can help massively alongside coaching in your development areas)
- Seeking support and friendship from others (and not buying into the myth that you shouldn't form friendships at work - appropriate boundaries notwithstanding).

MENTAL

- Practising stress-management and prevention techniques
- Engaging in mind-gym type activities
- Training and development in all key result areas
- Training in effective thinking skills (problem solving, creativity, avoiding thinking errors, critical thinking, etc)
- Accessing workplace counselling where available/needed
- Attending mindfulness sessions.

SPIRITUAL

- Practising meditation / visualisation
- Going on re-balancing nature walks (beach, forest, etc.)
- Practising yoga
- Reading/studying spiritual literature and teaching
- Engaging in religious/spiritual activity (prayer, chanting, singing, etc)
- Listening to music.

Workplaces looking to support wellbeing and personal effectiveness should consider how they can promote awareness of the four realms to their staff, and consider what they can do in terms of provision of facilities, resources and time where possible.

We all know we would benefit from doing the activities listed, and are no doubt doing some of them already. So it's worth giving thought to what you aren't currently doing, and how you might incorporate a few more of these things into your day/week. What gets in the way for you? Sometimes it's just about establishing new habits. Often we tell ourselves it's a shortage of time, but maybe we just need to place a few more boundaries around our time -

stop watching so much television for instance, or engaging in so much social media activity, in order to spend more time on the kind of activities that are truly renewing.

Life shouldn't be all about work and achievement. Optimal performance in work is only one side of the coin – the other is optimal happiness in life. So be a Corporate Athlete. Follow the tips in this article, and maybe read (or listen to) some books on the subject. But know that the benefits of these activities will ripple out far beyond work and improve the very quality of your life.

*This article has been adapted by the author, **Martine Bolton**, from an earlier version published via LinkedIn on 6th May 2018.*

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