

bpi surveys – Article 5

The Team thing

The Christmas break has given me the opportunity to catch up on two of my favourite pursuits, cycling and reading and as the former came to a very abrupt and painful – but temporary – end, I took the opportunity of reading five times Tour de France winner, Lance Armstrong's new book "Every second counts".

Those with only a passing interest in cycling and the Tour de France might equate Lance Armstrong's fifth successive victory in the event with Bjorn Borg's five Wimbledon championships or Tiger Wood's run of golf majors.

They are all extraordinary individual achievements but Armstrong's is very different in that paradoxically cycling is the ultimate team sport and he makes the point repeatedly that he could never have achieved these victories without the support of the eight other riders that make up the United Postal Services Team. As he says, "why should eight riders sweat and suffer for three weeks when only one man, me, will get the trophy"? He cites his fourth victory in 2002 as the most overwhelming because that year the UPS team was at the pinnacle of performance. He then devotes the best part of a chapter to explaining why the team that the French press christened Le Train Blue (after the UPS colours) was so good.

I had a particular interest in what Armstrong had to say because of the development of the latest **bpi** survey – **Into the Red** – that allows organisational workgroups to measure how far down the team development continuum they are. I was curious to see whether the characteristics that distinguished the United Postal Services team were the same as we have used to differentiate between a team and a workgroup.

Firstly though, a word or two about why teams are critical to Tour de France success

Anyone who has ridden a road bike with a group of other riders will know that the slipstreaming effect is extraordinary. A rider cycling in the middle of a group will use 30% - 40% less energy to maintain the same pace as the leader. If the group is a large one, it's much safer to ride at the front rather than in the middle or at the back. But no rider can win the Tour unless he is a great climber and for his climbing prowess to be exploited, he needs other great climbers on his team to pace and "tow" him until he is ready to launch his final attack. The only time the team leader is on his own is in the time trials where riders set off at two-minute intervals and race against the clock but of the twenty-one stages, only two follow this format. So the team riders protect and pace their leader, they chase down breakaways, they wait for the leader should he puncture, they collect and distribute water bottles from the team cars that follow the riders. Such behaviour "is asking for an extreme amount of self-sacrifice, perhaps even an unnatural amount. But the smart athlete, and person, knows that if self-sacrifice is hard, self-interest is worse.

It dooms a team; you wind up a bunch of singletons that just happen to wear the same shirts.” There is no doubt that the United Postal Team, in its commitment to Lance Armstrong, has been the best among the twenty or so teams that participate in the Tour.

In “**Into the Red**”, the statements that make up the survey are designed to trace the development of a workgroup from its beginning as a bunch of individuals – or singletons as Armstrong puts it – to a high performing team. The participants in the survey are asked to indicate their degree of agreement with each of 73 statements that are divided into five unequal groups. The largest group is what we call Team attributes, those attributes that reflect the personal qualities of the workgroup members and how they relate to others in the group. It’s what Armstrong calls “Investment”. “If you truly invest yourself in a team, you guarantee yourself a return on that investment, and that’s a big competitive advantage over other less-committed teams. On the Postal Service Team, we invest in each other’s efforts – and the result is that we often have the sensation that we’re racing against teams that merely spend themselves.”

I’m happy to say that all the characteristics of the Postal Service Team that Armstrong believes make it superior to the others are reflected in the survey. What are they? Here is a list of the key ones.

100% commitment to the team. “If you weren’t thinking “team” you got left home. It was that plain”.

Good humour - “we encouraged good humour, because it was an excellent painkiller. You had to mix laughs with hard work, and be able to tease each other without getting offended”.

Enjoyment of each other’s company – “Sometimes we’ll stay at a hotel where two or three other teams are lodged and we all end up in the dining room together. Our Postal team sits around the table laughing, and chucking dinner rolls, and even after we’ve done we linger over our plates enjoying each other’s company. But across the aisle is a team that’s full of free agents, with no one working very hard on anyone else’s behalf. They eat with their heads hanging down over their plates, not making conversation, and as soon as they finish their meals, they go to their rooms.”

Trust and support for each other – One UPS rider, Floyd Landis, was taking part in his first Tour and he had been dropped on the first major climb of the Tour.

“You know, I’m really sorry,” he said.

“You had the reverse lights on,” I told him.

Someone made a high-pitched sound like a tractor backing up. “Beep, beep, beep, beep!”

The bus erupted into raucous laughter.

I reassured Floyd that he was doing a fine job. The first mountain stage in the Tour was a right of passage for every first tour rider. Floyd was amazed. He couldn’t believe nine guys, all of us so stressed and tired, could be so forgiving of one another’s performances. But that

was exactly what made us a strong team. We urged one another on, and teased one another.”

A unique form of team communication – in the 2002 US Postal team, there were three Americans, two Spaniards and one each from Colombia, Belgium, the Czech Republic and Russia. “With so many different languages on the team, we ended up speaking a kind of pidgin or shorthand with each other. We swapped phrases and colloquialisms, and developed our own jokes.”

I spent eighteen years working for a multi-national and in that time in many jobs on two continents, I was privileged to be a member of a four-man team for about two years. It was the most fulfilling part of my time with the company by far.

The fact is that becoming a team in the US Postal mould was always hard and these days, the corporate environment makes it virtually impossible. But **“Into the Red”** has shown that any group has the capacity to become a very effective one by working on the fundamentals of workgroup performance – the setting of overall goals, understanding your role in the group and those of other group members, measuring performance, setting group rules etc. You can’t teach group members to support and trust one another but you can make sure that meetings are productive for all participants and that they start and finish on time.

One of the characteristics of teams is that they constantly measure their own performance. Armstrong in his training lead-up to the Tour thought nothing of ringing his US based coach Chris Carmichael at 1.00am in the morning to ask him why he hadn’t e-mailed him his latest training program and when he had him on the line, to add: “Listen”, I’d say, “at this time last year my cadence (pedal revolutions per minute) was 93, and now it’s 90, but I’m on the same wattage (power output). How come? We need to look at that, and the spreadsheets of my last twelve tests, and measure them against where I was two years ago”

“Into the Red” allows workgroup members to measure the equivalent of cadence and wattage. Individual member and workgroup performance is readily calculated. The group can then select those factors that are most under their control to influence and work on initiatives to improve performance. They can then measure the impact of the initiatives taken by running **“Into the Red”** once more.

Graham Haines
bpi consultants

