

## How Adidas is Using Sports Psychology to Sharpen Employee Performance

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Adidas are on a mission to evolve to a performance culture – establishing a fast-paced, feedback-driven performance management approach that has more in common with the elite athletes that they sponsor than their corporate competitors Nike and Puma. This signals a significant shift for Adidas in their performance strategy which previously conformed to the traditional PM model.

“In the past we followed the traditional approach of annual reviews at the end of the year. We were always looking back and that that really wasn’t in line with our vision for a future-focused performance culture,” said **Andy Longley, Global Senior Director of Talent**.

Speaking ahead of his session at [HR Innovation & Tech Fest](#), he tells us about Adidas’ new performance and development approach, dubbed “My Best”, which borrows elements of sports psychology and techniques from elite sports people and applies them to monitoring the performance of their 55,000 people.

“We’re using this new performance development approach to accelerate our culture change so we can focus on the two culture shifts we’re trying to drive: 1. Playing to win: promoting healthy competition against our competitors as well as internally; and 2. Evolving to a performance culture: constantly try to improve what we do at the individual level, at the team level and a macro level.”

### Coaching, Detail and Regularity

The foundation of Adidas’ new performance development approach is coaching, with an emphasis on detail and regularity, something that was missing in their existing approach.

“For an athlete to become the champion of their own development, whether that be an Olympian or a team sport athlete, they need regular feedback from coaches, teammates, nutritionists and analysts. This regular, real-time information is essential for creating self-awareness in the athletes, and helps them iterate on improving their performance every day.

“That’s one of the foundational tenets of what we’re trying to do in ‘My Best’. Creating more awareness within ourselves, as employees and leaders, building more coaching into our muscle memory, to help create performance-driven habits in our people every day, just like athletes do.”

Their feedback-focused performance development strategy has four key elements which Longley outlines here:

#### 1. Monthly Touch Base

“The monthly touch base is a conversation between an employee and their line manager that is focused on performance and development only. It’s not an operational catch-up. We’ve

created this space for these coaching conversations to happen more frequently and it's the glue that holds a lot of the other elements of our performance strategy together."

## **2. 90 Day Plan**

"Very rarely do athletes focus on the end of the season; they'd normally focus on their next game if it's a team sport, or their next event if it's an individual athlete. They're looking to try to achieve a personal best or land a team structure which often requires a frequently-changing strategy. We've brought that shorter-term focus into our performance strategy with our 90-day plans.

"The 90-day plans give a shorter-term focus on our objectives and mean we can adapt our objectives for that quarter against the business needs. It means we are agile enough to be able to pivot according to the business conditions or environment e.g. if we get a new competitor, or if we have a macroeconomic situation like we are currently experiencing in Latin America with devaluations of some of the currency, that has a big impact. This shorter-term focus on our objectives means we're able to iterate more regularly."

## **3. Technology Driven Feedback**

"Just like an athlete would use biometrics such as GPS tracking to measure how many kilometres they run in a match, we wanted to use technology to bring in feedback from multiple sources, so that each employee could see how they were tracking in real-time. We've built an app which is able to collect feedback from stakeholders, colleagues, or team members if you're a leader, to help you evaluate and drive your performance."

## **4. Quarterly Performance Conversations**

"The final element of our performance strategy was changing the frequency of our formal performance conversations from annually to quarterly. These more frequent reviews allow employees to get feedback in time to be able to digest it and adjust their work accordingly. Just as athletes would review footage of their last game to improve their technique for their next match, we're helping our people do the same rather than waiting till the end of the year."

## **Plan Ahead to Avoid Stalling**

The program was formally launched in Q1 2018, but the culture change piece started almost two years before, and this is a key factor in the program's success says Longley.

"I advise to give yourself at least a year to plan when it comes to culture change, otherwise you can have some early struggles. A year seems like a long time for an organisation to wait, especially smaller ones, but it's not a long time in a culture change and planning before you lead is incredibly important.

"For this program to work, we knew we needed to get a head start on building up our leadership capabilities so they were able to have effective coaching conversations and be able to give challenging feedback. Throughout 2017 we worked with our leaders to foster these skills and then when we launched the program in 2018 we were confident they were in a much better place to be playing a role of coach, rather than the more traditional role of giving instructions."

As for organisations who are looking to embark on a similar transformation, Longley has a two more pieces of valuable advice:

**Find a way to remove an individual's financial compensation from what you're trying to do with culture change.** "When an individual's bonus is tied to trying to change their performance, and you're also trying to execute a cultural change, there can be mixed messages. Individuals are always thinking around their bonus, especially the extrinsically-motivated individuals, so if you really want your culture change to land, disentangle your individual compensation from it and you'll get traction much sooner. You can always introduce it back in once your culture change has landed. That's something we would have done earlier if we'd known."

**Establish leadership groups to bring culture change to life.** "It was important to us that "My Best" was not an HR-driven initiative. The program is CEO-launched and driven, but we also created two leadership groups which are really our primary way of driving the cultural change.

"The first is our core leadership group made up of 22 of the most senior leaders in the organisation. They are the ones who really drive and champion leadership as a differentiator in performance culture. The second group is an extended leadership group which comprises 150 of our most driven and passionate executives. These two groups are the way we bring the culture change to life. They role model the performance culture and our purpose of 'changing lives through sport'.

### **A Marathon, not a Sprint**

The program has received incredible support from adidas' employees who are loving the one-on-one feedback and career coaching. This is reflected in the completion rates of performance conversations which is currently sitting at an incredible 95%.

A more challenging aspect of the My Best program has been the time commitment expected from senior leaders, but it's all part of the growing pains of a new program says Longley.

"If you've got a team of 12 people which you're mentoring for an hour every month, in addition to your day job, and being part of a leadership group which needs to attend leadership activation events every quarter, that all takes a lot of time. So helping support the executive level in that has been the challenging part. But that's where of course having your CEO and your board as the champion endorsers – and not your CHRO which many organisations have for a program like this – has meant we're able to move through that with support."

**Here more about adidas' innovative approach to driving performance at [HR Innovation & Tech Fest](#), 18-19 November 2019 in Sydney.**

### **About the Speaker**



Andy Longley is Global Senior Director of Talent at adidas. Before joining adidas, Andy was Head of Recruitment at Emirates, responsible for attracting and selecting international pilots. He has an MSc in Applied Psychology and his extensive experience includes organisational psychology, talent acquisition, talent management, executive and employee coaching, diversity & inclusion, strategy and workforce planning. In 2010/11 he spent year as volunteer for the UN, monitoring international peace agreements in the Middle East.