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Positively Legal: Lessons from the Olympics

Skills and Professional Development



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Every four years we celebrate the world's best athletes competing against each other, and, more importantly, their own expectations. While we are inspired by their athleticism, we are won over by their personal stories and journeys. Sport, at this level, doesn't just teach us about winning, it teaches us lessons we can use in our own careers and lives.

Here are eight life and career lessons to take from the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris.

1. Perseverance and avoiding burnout

Perseverance is about following a goal and developing skills along the way to pursue that goal and to overcome (or learn from) "failures" and success. Athletes face highs and lows in their events, but it is how they celebrate them and learn from them that builds a career beyond a single Olympic Games.

For some, it is learning to overcome injuries or accepting they must pull out of a competition for the sake of their long-term careers. In Tokyo, Olympic Champion Simone Biles pulled out of many of her events to prioritize her mental health. She was able to return and win in the 2024 Olympics. Similarly, Italian tennis player and current World No. 1 Jannik Sinner pulled out of the current Olympics with physical fatigue, wanting to ensure he is able to play other tournaments this year rather than burning out.

Once considered the pinnacle for lawyers, being a partner or a general counsel, lawyers now recognize there are many, varied ways to enjoy a very successful and happy career — and life. Crucially, success is individual. To some, the title is the most important; for others, it is money; and for others, it is flexibility and working on interesting or varied projects and industries.

However we define success, we should focus not on the individual grind of daily work or a

particular job or project, but on longevity.

While we need perseverance to achieve our goals, we also need to know when to go fast and when to prioritize our health and well-being (both mental and physical).

This may look like taking a different role during times of our lives where we have other priorities (health or family) or making sure we take breaks both longer term and across the year to avoid ultimately burning out.

[ACC Members: Download the new Well-being Toolkit for In-House Lawyers.](#)

2. Goal setting and achievement

Athletes set clear and achievable goals — they plan, they train, and they constantly evaluate their performance using data and feedback to adjust their strategy. Setting goals for ourselves can feel daunting, but it is important both for short-term and long-term successes for ourselves and our teams.

Shawn Achor, in his book [Before Happiness](#), describes the X-Spot — the point where marathon runners turn the corner at 26.1 miles out of the 26.2-mile race and, contrary to expectation and despite their exhaustion, speed up to get to the finish. Achor states that our brains are goal-orientated machines. For marathon runners, as they see the finish line (their goal), their brains release endorphins and other powerful accelerants needed to find the energy to cross the line.

Goals and goal setting work because they help us to find the motivation and energy we need to complete a task. They motivate us to persist with tasks over time and they direct our attention.

Goal setting is effective and often critical to our success because our goals direct our attention and help us stay away from irrelevant tasks that do not align with our goals or needs. In addition, goals help us find the motivation to stay with a task over time and the energy to finish it.

Finding the right goal setting strategy is key. My [earlier article](#) on goal setting describes different strategies including Lock and Latham's principles for successful goal setting (commitment, clarity, challenge, task completion, and feedback), whether to keep goals to ourselves or share them, and strategies to change the way our brains perceive a goal.

3. The importance of teamwork

The Olympics is one of the best examples of individuals competing against each other, but also competing together successfully as a team. The cornerstone of success at the Olympics — and at work — is fostering a team spirit, making everyone feel supported and valued while at the same time fostering an individual striving for excellence at work.

Coaches play an important role at the Olympics to guide a team towards success, providing technical expertise as well as emotional support. A leader in the workplace does the same. They need to help create a shared vision to motivate the team and align everyone towards a common goal.

Lawyers, much like athletes, are competitive and like to strive for their own personal excellence.

A leader's role is to harness that competitiveness into a successful team, where everyone works towards a shared goal rather than looking at what other people in the team are working on or comparing themselves to others in the team.

Celebrating individual successes and calling out individual work during team meetings is important, but celebrating team success is more important because everyone in the team will feel included; it is important to show team members how their work contributes to overall success of the business.

It is often useful to help team members find meaning and purpose. In [my earlier article on finding meaning](#), I describe Martin Seligman's [PERMA model](#) (the five intrinsically motivating components people pursue that contribute to their well-being), the [PURE model](#), finding meaning in our lives, and crafting meaning in our daily jobs.

In [another earlier article](#), I considered lessons from another individual/team sport (Formula 1) including focusing on the positive and human, putting people front and center, fostering a no-blame culture and creating a space where individuals perform at their best.

4. Leading in a multi-generational workplace

In a [recent article](#), Rohan Taylor, head coach of the Australian Swim Team, was asked how he leads a team of swimmers who range between 17 and 30. While team members can be across different generations and express themselves in different ways, Taylor asks two questions:

“What are the 10 characteristics an athlete needs to be the world's best?”

“What are the 10 characteristics you want from me as your coach?”

Despite varying ages, their answers are the same: “They want to know where they stand. They want to be part of the journey. They want me to be firm but fair with them.” Essentially, they want transparency and empathy. Taylor's comment was “backed by research from Allianz Australia that shows 31 percent of employees believe their managers lack compassion towards their personal circumstances and the impact this has on their ability to do their job effectively.”

Leaders today need a mix of technical expertise and empathy to help their teams thrive. Lawyers are no different; with new generations of lawyers coming into teams, we need to find ways to connect

with their issues and help them thrive.

One important caution from Taylor is, “You want to watch those you lead on the rollercoaster, be aware of the dips that are coming, but you don't get on the rollercoaster. If you do, you'll bury yourself and lose your objective view.” He also advocates to take time away for personal time, ensuring that, as a leader, you do not burnout.

5. Mental strength is as important as physical abilities

Mental health is as important to athletes as their physical health. Mental health includes emotional, psychological, and social well-being.

This includes believing in yourself and your abilities — and overcoming fears and anxieties.

Australian swimming Olympic Gold medalists Mollie O'Callaghan and Ariarne Titmus are on the same team and have the same goal, yet they are described as very different personalities. Titmus is described as calm and relishing a challenge, whereas O'Callaghan has been described as nervous and, in fact, has been seen visibly shaking before stepping up onto the block.

O'Callaghan [was praised](#) for being able to use what has been described as her nervous energy or anxiety to her advantage. “We're talking about a level of peak anxiety to raise yourself up to a level that you can perform at, that you'd never be able to do, but not fall off the edge of the cliff where it's too much (and) it overwhelms you,” Olympic legend Ian Thorpe said of O'Callaghan.

Stressful situations affect us all, and making that stress work for us is crucial to our success. But knowing when that stress turns to burnout is even more important.

In [an earlier article on befriending stress](#), I spoke with a neuroscientist and a number of general counsels on how they make stress work for them, showing that each person has a different way of coping — whether it is exercising, making time to meditate, or travel, we all need some way to support our mental and physical health along our careers.

6. The success of gender equality

Women only made up 38 percent of athletes in the 2000 Sydney Olympics. In 2024, they will make up 50 percent for the first time in history.

In [a 2020 EY report](#) exploring why female athletes make good leaders, EY described the importance of sports participation to help “girls grow up healthy and confident, helps young female leaders rise, and helps C-suite leaders succeed.” In addition, the report found that 94 percent of C-suite women “have played sports, demonstrating that sport participation can propel them into successful business careers.”

Diversity and inclusion is a cornerstone of the Olympics, and the unprecedented success from teams shows how important it is. The overwhelming majority of Australia's current gold medals for this Olympics are from female athletes.

The Olympics show us how embracing differences when recruiting — and then cultivating an

inclusive space where everyone feels valued and supported — ensures that people achieve their best for themselves as individuals as well as for their overall team.

In [my most recent article](#), I spoke with general counsel Rachel Lauenders on How and Why to Foster a Diverse Team, including looking at the benefits of diversity, how to promote diversity and inclusion, and tips to bring out the best in a diverse team.

7. Using humor to lead a team

A 2018 [Stanford paper](#) summarized The Power of Humor in the Olympic Journey, describing humor as serving at least three roles, finding it would “unite the group, diffuse tension and prevent crippling seriousness, and boost players’ pain tolerance — that in turn helped the team train hard and be successful, and still have fun”.

Jennifer Aaker and Naomi Bagdonas describe humor as a superpower in, [Humor, Seriously](#) and [Don’t Stop Us Now](#) podcast. They argue that “viewing our mistakes through a comic lens can have a meaningful impact on our psychology.” They describe Warren Buffet, who projects a “guy next door” kind of image as a “classic example of a leader whose sincere style of self-deprecating humor” was described by Forbes as “his underappreciated superpower.”

Keeping positive and finding humor in what can feel like constant stress and obstacles goes a long way to ensuring your team make good decisions and develop strong relationships across the business.

8. Effectively engage with your stakeholders

Finally, let’s consider the bigger picture from an organizational perspective – how to stage a successful Olympic Games.

Not everyone wants their city to host an Olympic Games, but success comes from engaging the local community early on with empathy and understanding their needs, then ensuring the planning process creates a sense of ownership and pride.

Similarly, a successful legal team is one that speaks with its stakeholders with understanding and empathy, one that works with them on projects and on business issues to understand their needs, and one that builds relationships wherein everyone feels that they have successfully contributed to the outcome and understand why decisions they may not have agreed with were made.

The Paris Olympic Games have already provided moments of individual brilliance and perseverance. For Australia, Paris is [our most successful Olympic Games](#). While the moments of individual brilliance are important, the spotlight has been on the multigenerational teams, the incredible teamwork and the dominance of women in their success at these games — all lessons we can take away for ourselves and our teams.

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Outside of work, Cavallaro loves traveling, snorkeling, meditating and spending time in nature.