

**Barry Johnson** and **Mandy Geal** use two famous sporting achievements to highlight how we can make real measurable changes in performance, the factors we need to bring them about and the effects on other people.

**P**erformance management seems to mean different things to different people, so it's understandable that confusion sometimes surrounds this concept. For the purpose of this article, we will assume performance management is the managing of performance.

It seems to us that there are only two reasons to manage performance. The first is to maintain the performance already achieved and the second is to manage an improvement in performance. We believe the second is probably more difficult than the first, and that is what this article will look at. It is not uncommon when talking about such a subject to be met by all the reasons why improved performance worked somewhere else and why it won't work 'here'.

In order to look at the elements that impact performance, and hence the elements that need to be considered when managing it, we needed some unequivocal measure of improvement that was achieved by some clearly identifiable actions – something that would be readily recognisable by most readers because it requires no industry-specific knowledge. So we chose sport. But not sport in general. We chose areas in which each person competes against other individuals, where the winner is clearly defined, and where the achievement record shows a continuous and measurable improvement – the high jump and the mile. Why these? We'll see as the story unfolds.

### THE HIGH JUMP

Let's start with the high jump. We have probably all seen this. A tall slim guy (or woman) comes bouncing towards two uprights across which is precariously balanced a horizontal crossbar. He throws himself skywards to get over the said crossbar. He may or may not make it. So much for the basics of the high jump. What this simple scenario gives us is a common base of objective measurement.



Let us tell you the story of one high-jump athlete, Dick Fosbury. We'll explore what he did and the factors that enabled him to become an Olympic champion – factors that you can apply in your organisation. They just need the management skills to put them in place. We will also look at the effect on others of what he did.

### Fosbury, the flop

Dick Fosbury was a student at Oregon State University (USA) in the 1960s. He was also a member of the track and field team. He wanted to be a high jumper but he wasn't very good. Actually, he was decidedly mediocre. The prime reason for this was he just could not get the hang of the 'straddle', the prime technique used by top jumpers at the time. Fosbury used the 'scissors', the technique that was common back in the 1940s. It is the sort of action

you might see children use to jump – upright, over a low fence.

With time, the technique had changed from the scissors to the straddle. With the change in technique came an improvement in performance. The key to success in the straddle was leg strength and the ability to roll over the bar face down. But Fosbury could not master this. One of the things that creates a change in performance is a change in the techniques used to produce the output. The problem is, not everyone can make the necessary change.

Back in 1941, Lester Steers of the USA broke the high-jump record in Seattle with a scissors leap of 2.1 metres. Perhaps that was the last time this old-fashioned technique broke a record. In 1963, when Fosbury was developing as an athlete, the Russian Valery Brumel straddled jumped 2.28 metres. Of course,

# TO THE MARK:

# the reality of

# performance management

politics are never far away from international athletics, so when Brumel broke the world record wearing one thick-soled running shoe and one that was thin-soled, he was accused of cheating. Could that be because, at this politically sensitive time between the Superpowers, a Russian had thought of something before the Americans? The point is, when new techniques are tried there will be objections. The reasons may be valid or they may not. The more important point is performance improvement only comes through experimenting with different techniques.

Mind you, other things had changed since the 1940s. Someone had invented the Tartan Track. These tracks use polyurethane, combined with natural and synthetic rubber granules to produce a more 'springy' track, a much better surface than the cinders used previously.

To give you an example, it was in spring 2001 that the University of Oregon's new Tartan Track was used – and performances were sensational. The performance of the year was 18 year-old Alan Webb with his 3 minute 53.43 second high-school mile, breaking Jim Ryan's 36 year-old record. The winner of the Prefontaine Classic was world record holder Hichem El Guerrouj, who ran the first sub-3.50 minute mile on American soil.

The run up to the high jump was now made of this new material. Technology is a wonderful thing. It meant that the jumpers could travel faster and had a firmer base for take-off. So there was an improvement in performance due to the introduction of a new technology. This was coupled with an improvement in track shoe design, predetermined by the previously mentioned Valery Brumel.

## KEY LEARNING POINTS

- Managing performance requires managing a number of elements.
- Not all the elements are present in managing any specific performance improvement.
- Managing performance is dynamic and is not about a set process to be followed. There is no one right answer.

## Innovation

In the mid-sixties the uprights and crossbar had not really changed. However, instead of a sandpit there was now an air-filled bag which provided a soft landing (and a reduction in injuries).

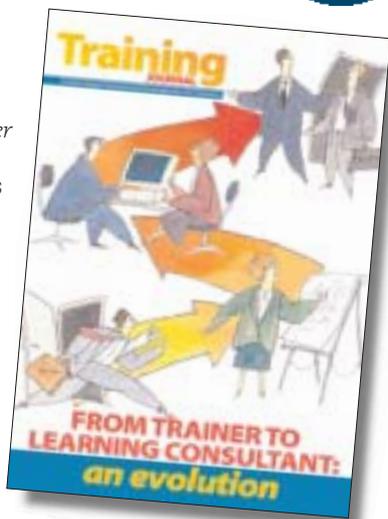
This latest change in technology had not really made any major differences until Fosbury developed a new technique. Instead of facing the bar to jump he turned his body backwards, flopping over the bar with his spine arched, following with his legs and landing on his shoulders. This could not have been done had the landing been in a sandpit. Fosbury innovated, adapting an old technique (the scissors) and new technology (the airbag) to produce a new technique. With this technique his high-jump career took off. As strange as it looked, it worked, the technique being dubbed the 'Fosbury Flop' by a reporter from Medford, Oregon.

In 1968, Fosbury won the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) indoor and outdoor high-jump titles and was placed third at the United States Olympic trials. Interestingly, even when he proved 'The Flop' enabled him to jump much higher, his coach tried to get him to change back to the straddle, only accepting his method of jumping after he had worked with him for some time. →

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**No matter how well a team is organised, no matter how well it is directed, it will perform only as well as the people in it**

→ Fosbury was now off to the 1968 Olympic Games. His innovative style captivated the crowd. Nobody jumped like him. The crowd was with him as he cleared every height up to 2.22 metres without a miss. At the height of 2.24 metres all the remaining competitors failed, and Fosbury failed on his first two attempts. On his final attempt he cleared the height, winning the gold medal and setting a new Olympic record.

The Fosbury Flop became the standard technique for high jumpers. In 1993, the current world record was set by Javier Sotomayer of Cuba with an incredible jump of 2.45 metres.

**THE FOUR-MINUTE MILE**

It is not only the past that can be a block to us managing the changes that lead to improvement. It can also be the belief that 'it can't be done'. That was the belief prevalent before Roger Bannister broke the intangible four-minute mile barrier.

**Improvement goals**

The four-minute mile was once thought impossible, perhaps because nobody had ever run the mile in under four minutes. Anyone who has tried to achieve in sport knows there is great difficulty in breaking records, be it a world record, a school record or your own personal best.

There is great difficulty in achieving goals. We intentionally set goals that are difficult. What compounds the problem is when the goal has not previously been achieved. We often meet with the reaction: 'Who else has done this?' The thinking in companies often seems to be: 'We are not going to innovate and we are not going to take a risk; we might fail.' It was no different back then. According to physiologists of the 1950s, it was dangerous to the health of any athlete who attempted to run the mile in under four minutes. We are so glad that Bannister did not think like that. The four-minute mile was his tough, considered-out-of-reach, goal. Perhaps the first step is to unlock the self-imposed limits on our own success. Perhaps managers of performance do exactly that.

If we are to attain improvement within our organisation we have to set tough goals. We have to believe we can achieve these goals and we have to convince others that they can also achieve them. This is called motivation and requires leadership. What we find is that people work harder and longer to achieve goals if the goals are incremental. If we set a step-change as a goal we have to find a different way to do it. Clearly if we want to travel a mile in under four minutes we are not going to run. We will find a different way, such as riding a bike (see *Business Beyond the Box* by John O'Keefe).<sup>1</sup>

So what did Bannister do when he decided to run a mile in under four minutes? Well, get really fit for a start. He trained hard to be in the peak of condition. No change there, then. He had always done that. Perhaps if you are setting tough goals as a manager you will train your staff hard so that they are in the best possible condition to achieve – not on a track but in the skills and mental fitness required.

**TEAMWORK**

What did Bannister do that was different to help him achieve his goal? He decided he needed teamwork – although he did not call it that. Bannister's team-mates were Chris Brasher and Christopher Chataway, and they worked together to help him.

The first four-minute mile attempt, which took place at Iffley Road, Oxford, was run on a blustery day with crosswinds gusting to 15 miles an hour (indeed, some say as much as 25 miles per hour). Brasher set off rapidly in the lead. For the first two laps of the quarter-mile track, Bannister stayed close to him. It is reported that Bannister shouted at Brasher to go faster. Brasher maintained his fast pace clocking 1 minute 58.2 seconds for the first half mile. Chataway moved into the lead for the third lap, with Bannister close on his heels. Chataway took Bannister through the three-quarter mile point in 3 minutes 00.5 seconds. At 300 yards from the finish Bannister sprinted, smooth and powerful, and drew away steadily from Chataway as he drove for the tape.

This was teamwork at its best – each of the three men knowing what had to be done, then doing it, to achieve a performance goal. Nothing arbitrary here; it was planned, organised and geared to achieve together. Let us be clear about the people. No matter how well a team is organised, no matter how well it is directed, it will perform only as well as the people in it. Bannister chose his teammates well. They offered the very best they could. He got peak performance out of them.

Is this different from your organisation? The manager ensures the staff are trained, creates a situation in which they are motivated to perform, then moulds them together to work as one unit to achieve the defined goals.

### The knock-on effect

What was the result of Bannister breaking this psychological barrier? He unlocked belief. Once Bannister broke the four-minute mile in May 1954, many others broke it. Within 46 days of his achievement, John Landy broke the record with a mile in 3 minutes 57.9 seconds. By the end of 1954, 16 runners had run a mile in under four minutes. Within a year 37 runners did it, and one year later another 300 runners had done it.

By today's standards Roger Bannister was not a special athlete, but he was a special man because he managed performance and became a role model for others.

### CONCLUSION

If talent exists, then practice and effort are necessary for the talent to be fully realised. If people are going to improve performance, then practice will be a basic requirement. We know that at first our performance will not be good (and may get worse), but with practice it will improve. Any downturn on the road to achieving improvement has to be managed with support and encouragement.

The improvements in world athletics records reflect a number of elements – for example:

- changes in technology such as the Tartan Track
- changes in methods that takes advantage of the technology
- talent
- training
- practice, and
- support and encouragement.

**By today's standards Bannister was not a special athlete, but he was a special man because he managed performance and became a role model for others**

### What are the key things?

The prime changes that need to be managed to enhance performance are those in technology and methods. These often require innovation – challenging the way things are done now. But innovation alone is not enough. Initiative to drive through the improvements is required, as is the belief that a goal can be achieved. Objections will occur. They come from two main sources: a reluctance to change that may be related to some beliefs or emotional blockage; and a reluctance to accept that an output or a way of doing something is achievable so there is no attempt to try.

Any new technology (no matter how minor) and any change in method requires training the people involved to ensure they are equipped with the skills, knowledge and attitudes to achieve improvement. The attitudinal change is often missed. It may relate to values or beliefs – for example, valuing the safety of the status quo or the belief that 'I am not good enough'. It may also relate to a lack of self-belief, confidence or motivation to use soft skills to communicate, influence, lead and enable people to work with others to achieve common goals. Talent is required, as is the ability to work successfully in a team. Goals must be clear, wanted and believed in. Others achieving goals and being role models overcome barriers to improved performance.

Your performance is in your hands and, as a leader, you can manage the performance of others, too. 

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### Reference

1. John O'Keefe, *Business Beyond the Box*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1998.