Leadership insights: from champion to Chair

When you have achieved a long run of positive results and developed a reputation for success, it can feel risky to take on a new direction which is untried and untested. This is what Dame Katherine Grainger, Britain's most decorated female Olympic athlete, felt when she was appointed as Chair of UK Sport in 2017. She tells Deputy Editor Sue Stockdale how her experience in high-performance rowing helped her adapt to this new role.

Dame Katherine Grainger, a former rower, with medals from five successive Olympic Games, had no previous experience as a leader in sports administration. It was a risk, she says, for both herself and those who recruited her. 'It relied on those making the appointment to have faith in me – it was all about taking risks because there had never been an athlete in this role before, so there was a chance it might not work for any of us.'

She recalls that Liz Nicholl CBE, the CEO of UK Sport, the UK's high-performance sports agency, expressed initial surprise when hearing of Grainger's interest in the role, given her inexperience in sports administration. But Nicholl quickly thought of what an advantage a former athlete could bring to the role, and since Grainger's appointment she has been a great ally. Grainger reflects; 'she has never questioned anything that I wanted to get involved in, and just encourages me to be the best I can possibly be. Obviously you have to be a very fast learner and prove your capabilities early on, but with the credibility I brought from my sporting success it gave me confidence to acknowledge that I was not the finished product and to be open about the areas that I needed to develop.'

Grainger believes that the mark of a great leader is someone who is constantly improving themselves, and it is a powerful message within an organisation for the people at the top to acknowledge they are still learning and to admit when they've not got things right. But it's not always an easy thing to do. 'It's quite a vulnerable conversation to have – especially when you're coming into a leadership position – to then confess early on that there are areas where I think I'm not good enough yet.'

This is where coaching can be particularly helpful. 'I think great coaches are good at helping athletes and leaders to be open about their weaknesses. They recognise when to push people on and say there's more we need to do here, but also when to say that's enough for now, you are doing a good job. They find a way of making that a very positive experience, because of how they help you understand the situation. Then you can see it as a positive step to add to your knowledge and learning and become better every day.'

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Staying at the top of your game in any sport these days is a relentless pursuit of improvement. Katherine reflects that what she loved about being an athlete, and still loves about working in a sporting environment, is the constant search for more and for better. She believes that creativity is needed to constantly ignite new directions and create new opportunities.

Having had over twenty years of training, feedback and a focus on performance, Grainger acknowledges that there is always more to learn – and it's rare that she ever feels like the finished article. In sport, she says, you don't just repeat the result you got last time because everything moves on so fast. You need to be creative in your thinking to find the next way forward.

'That need to push yourself constantly can be overwhelming, so you sometimes need to be allowed the freedom to be creative', says Grainger. 'I have observed people who are brilliant at being creative, and they do it by opening up their thinking instead of reducing it. Rather than believing that there is only one way to do something, they ask: what if we did something different? And it's that "*What if?*" question that makes it really exciting. I think sport is a brilliant example of a place where art and science can come together at their best.'

Grainger continues: 'The science side of sport is lots of valuable detail and number-crunching analysis. Sometimes it can feel quite rigid because it is fact-based. But the people I admire the most can take that incredible scientific knowledge and interpret it creatively. Regardless of whether it's instinct, good judgment, knowledge or experience, it's how you integrate this thinking with the science to take risks and make decisions.'

Having also spoken to the manager of the England national men's football team, Gareth Southgate, about this, I was reminded that he takes a similar view to Grainger – that it's often not until the performance analysts question you about some aspect of an instinctive decision you took that some of the factors in your subconscious come into your conscious awareness.

This ability to raise awareness in others through asking questions is what a coach can help their clients with. By providing a safe and trusted space to help a leader reflect on their behaviour and explore why they took particular actions and identify different options, the coach can help their client to develop more creative solutions in dealing with future challenges.

MAINTAINING THE HABITS OF CHALLENGE, ANALYSIS AND FEEDBACK

Challenging accepted ways of doing things is not the most comfortable place for any leader to be in many organisations, where maintaining the status quo is often easier and causes less conflict. Grainger believes, however, that part of her role as Chair of UK Sport is to challenge and question how things are done. Having lived twenty years of her life being challenged every day to improve, it is a discipline she is familiar with. While her role is part-time, she says it can be easy to get pulled into doing more when you enjoy working with the people, care about the role and are passionate about sport. She believes it is her duty to avoid getting embedded in the day-to-day detail, but instead to bring a viewpoint from a very different perspective. 'It's my job to bring other inputs from worlds beyond just my own office. If I feel I am getting too involved, I have to check myself

and step back a little, because the only way I can be creative and challenge what's going on is to be dispassionate and draw on a broad range of information. My job is about seeing the connections between seemingly unrelated pieces of information and putting it all together. That might mean just taking time to read the newspaper while I am travelling, or being able to meet a broad range of people from different backgrounds to get some new perspectives.'

Another practice from the world of high-performance sport that can influence creativity is that of performance review and feedback. However, this skill has not always translated effectively into a desk-based leadership role. As a rower, Katherine was used to having every element of her technique, psychology and physiology examined and questioned on a daily basis with the aim of seeking improvements.

'I used to get frustrated at times with the level of review we would do, but having left that now I realise it was an absolute gift to have people looking at and questioning my performance every single day. I realise now that while we can have time built in after board meetings to review, other things can get in the way and you don't ever catch up. There's no one there to ask, "How did that go?" or "What could you do better?". This is where you get your performance advantage by having the ability to clearly and objectively assess your performance. In sport – it's bread and butter, but not in business.'

Clearly and objectively assessing your performance on a daily basis is bread and butter in sport – but not in business.

This is an area where coaches can support leaders by encouraging them to build in time in their schedules to properly critique their own performance. It does not have to be an onerous activity. Grainger recalls that when the rowing team came out of the boat the athletes, along with their coach, could critique their own performance in less than fifteen minutes. 'Within minutes, we could score our own performances, capture what went well and what we would do differently. We had all already agreed on what we were going to judge ourselves on, so it was a quick process. It can be important to capture this in the moment and then look at it in detail later, but if you don't review straight away you rarely remember the key points later.' She adds: 'In a boardroom, one way of doing a quick review can be to ask those attending a meeting how they rated it on a scale of 1-10, and to state one thing that was good and one thing that could be improved for next time. That way it keeps the process short and snappy, but everyone has to want to do it.'

RESULTS V ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

As a public body, UK Sport has a responsibility to demonstrate that it delivers good value for money in creating Olympic and Paralympic success. This means everything must be accountable and be visibly measured. More recently, the agency has come under greater scrutiny after some sports hit the headlines due to athletes complaining about a negative culture, unacceptable behaviour and the relentless pressure to win medals.[1] This led UK Sport to put in place a series of Culture Health Checks, following an extensive consultation and survey with athletes, staff and stakeholders in the high-performance system in 2017.

It found that more than 90 per cent of athletes and staff felt proud to be part of their world class programme, while more

than 80 per cent of athletes and staff said that their programme encouraged them to be the best they can be.[2] It also found key areas that could be improved, including easier whistleblowing and reporting procedures, and more support for mental health.

I asked Grainger about how she balanced the need for results against having a healthy culture. She believes that the best results come because of the environments the athletes operate in, and that it's wrong to say that if you have a healthy culture you won't get good results.

She recalled: 'I remember when we first started really talking about this very publicly within high-performance sport, and some of the first reactions were: does that mean you don't want to win, because you want to focus on culture instead? For me, it's such an instinctive thing: if people are looked after, and supported and are able to follow their passions, they will get better results, and they'll continue for longer, and they'll encourage more people to come into that sport. I've witnessed it and done it myself; having such strong personal ambition and drive can mean athletes very willingly push themselves, sometimes too far.'

Grainger adds that support is crucial. 'What you need is a support system around them – to know when not to hold them back, but also to make sure that they are looking after themselves. Certainly, with everything I've done the goals often really did seem impossible at the beginning, but those really big, scary, exciting goals are what get you out of bed in the morning. But you also need to have the right people to help you get there. And when you are having those bad days, you need to know you have the right places to turn to. I think now that the importance of culture has been promoted back up to the right level, results and culture should develop together at the same time to achieve sustainable results.'

Grainger believes that the general public are also interested in how our Olympic medals are achieved, so that when they look back at an exciting, inspirational moment they want to know it's been a positive experience for the athlete.

As we closed our conversation, Grainger was keen to point out that, while it is important that high-performance sport is lauded for its medal successes and achievements, it's also a story about humanness. 'Understanding the realities of what it takes to achieve success in high-performance sport, including the lows as well as the highs, can help to bring a broader perspective and understanding. Every athlete will be dealing with their own issues at some point. And that's because we're all human beings. We all have amazing strengths and weaknesses, and we're all trying to cope with life. And that's what unites us as human beings. This should be celebrated.'

ABOUT DAME KATHERINE GRAINGER DBE

Katherine Grainger is Britain's most successful female Olympic athlete, winning rowing medals in five consecutive Olympic Games. Originally from Glasgow, Katherine studied at Edinburgh University, where she took up the sport in 1993.

Alongside her rowing career, Katherine attained an honours LLB, an MPhil in Law and a PhD in the sentencing of homicide. She is currently Chair of UK Sport where she is building on the commitment to excellence that she witnessed as an athlete.

ABOUT SUE STOCKDALE

Sue Stockdale is an AC-accredited Master Executive Coach and coaching supervisor. Her clients include leaders in business, elite sport and not-for-profit organisations in the UK, Africa and North America. In 2014, Sue received a global coaching leadership award at the World Coaching Congress in Mumbai. She has represented Scotland in athletics and was the first British woman to ski to the magnetic north pole. As an author, Sue has written several books and is Deputy Editor of *Coaching Perspectives.*

1. https://www.uksport.gov.uk/news/2017/10/24/uk-sport-statement-on-culture
2. http://www.uksport.gov.uk/news/2018/05/17/new-steps-to-improve-athlete-welfare-including-enhanced-british-athletes-commission