

15 steps to PEAK performance

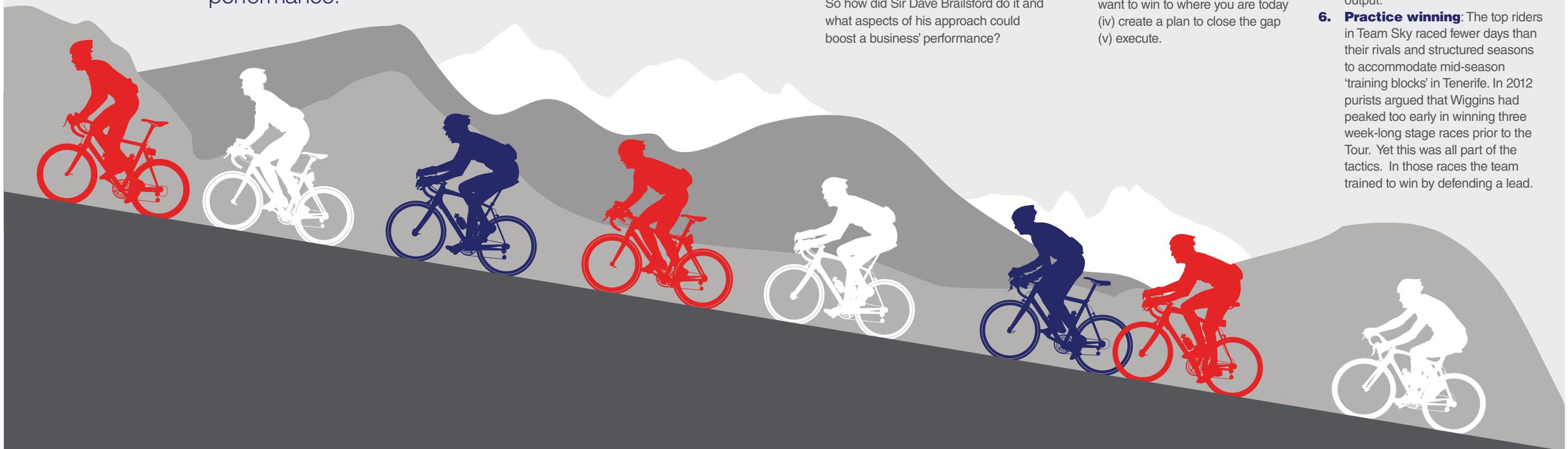
>> The transformation of British cycling from near bankruptcy to a dominant global force offers insights for any business looking to improve their performance.

In 1996 the British Cycling Federation faced insolvency and the closure of the only indoor Olympic-standard track in the UK. Britain was ranked 17th in the world and won just two bronze medals at the Olympics in Atlanta. By 2012, Britain was ranked number one in the world and British riders won 12 medals (8 gold) at the London Olympic Games. Sir Dave Brailsford is credited as one of the principal architects in transforming Great Britain's track fortunes over the last decade. In 2009, he was appointed the performance director and manager of a new professional British road cycling team, Team Sky which aimed to create the first British winner of the Tour de France, within five years. This was achieved twice, by Bradley Wiggins in 2012, followed by Chris Froome in 2013. So how did Sir Dave Brailsford do it and what aspects of his approach could boost a business' performance?

He followed 15 key steps to achieve peak performance:

- 1. Ensure clarity:** Brailsford attributes success to understanding what you are trying to win, being clear about the purpose, setting an outcome that everyone buys into and ensuring absolute clarity concerning roles, responsibilities, structure and tactics.
- 2. Create a 'Podium Programme':** British Cycling aimed for medals, nothing less. Team Sky was equally bold – to win the Tour with a clean (drug-free) British rider within five years.
- 3. Plan backwards:** Brailsford followed five key steps (i) prioritize and decide what you want to win because you can't win everything (ii) figure out what it will take to win (iii) work back from what you want to win to where you are today (iv) create a plan to close the gap (v) execute.

- 4. Focus on process:** To ensure a win at the Beijing Olympics, it was calculated that an improvement in time from over four minutes to under three minutes 55 seconds was needed. The resulting '3-55 programme' for the team was summarised in a video. In Beijing, the team executed 3-55 (which had become the norm in training) and won gold.
- 5. Get back to basics:** Tim Kerrison, Head of Performance Support argued for simplification saying "the rider who generates the most power, for the longest period of time, while weighing as little as possible, and slipping efficiently through the air, usually wins the race." To win the Tour de France, Bradley Wiggins focused on altitude training, weight control and power output.
- 6. Practice winning:** The top riders in Team Sky raced fewer days than their rivals and structured seasons to accommodate mid-season 'training blocks' in Tenerife. In 2012 purists argued that Wiggins had peaked too early in winning three week-long stage races prior to the Tour. Yet this was all part of the tactics. In those races the team trained to win by defending a lead.



7. Aggregate marginal gains:

Focus on improving components that can significantly affect overall performance by just 1%. Examples included taking riders' own mattresses and pillows to prevent neck and back problems and even training the team on how to wash their hands correctly to reduce the chance of infections.

8. Maximize the latest technologies:

British Cycling had a small team known as the 'secret squirrel club' that was charged with finding technological innovations to boost rider performance. The team would search for ways to get marginal gains from using technological advances across sport, science, industry and the military. For example, riders benefited from electrically heated 'hot pants' as leg warmers that were inspired by Formula One's tyre warmers.

9. Conduct the orchestra:

This is how Brailsford describes his approach to strategic leadership. He commented: "I don't coach the riders directly. I coach a team of people, including coaches to coach the riders." Brailsford maintains that the most important members of the team are the riders, not the coaches or the management: "We talked about taking the crown off the head of the coach and putting it on the head of the rider. First and foremost, I work for the riders."

10. Support the support:

Team Sky was the first professional team that offered dedicated one-to-one coaching to all its riders, deciding that the split of investment in riders versus support should be 80/20 rather than usual 90/10 split in pro cycling. "You'll get more from a £900,000 rider with a coach than you would from a £1m rider without one" was Brailsford's rationale.

11. Charter a team: The British Cycling Team set its own "team rules" which included: respect one another, watch each other's backs, be honest with one another, respect team equipment and be on time. They also had the following motivational motto on team clothing and printed on every bike:

*This is the line.
The line between winning and losing.
Between failure and success.
Between good and great.
Between dreaming and believing.
Between convention and innovation.
Between head and heart.
It is a fine line.
It challenges everything we do.
And we ride it every day.*

12. Build a strong CORE: This was Brailsford's acronym to explain how success would be achieved:

Commitment + Ownership + Responsibility = Excellence

This meant working only with people who have an intrinsic drive towards achieving a goal (commitment), people who take ownership of their training and development and responsibility for their performance.

13. Control the chimp: Brailsford claims that "the best appointment I've ever made" was Steve Peters, a psychiatrist from Rampton high-security hospital. Peters works with riders to pre-empt or control their 'chimp' - the emotional and irrational part of the brain, which has the potential to inhibit performance.

14. Manage the 'triangle of change': To achieve change people must be a) committed to being better b) psychologically minded (think that they can change) c) suffering enough to engage with change. If the first two are in place, Brailsford argues, it is possible to achieve change by either increasing consequence or reward.

15. Stick to your principles:

Whilst some professional teams abandoned their tough drug policies for 'truth and reconciliation' following the Lance Armstrong scandal, Brailsford reinforced zero tolerance. Four senior members of staff left Team Sky having confessed to past involvement in doping. "We prefer to compromise our performance rather than change our policy," says Brailsford.

We have the knowledge of what to do, but having the will to do it is something else. The 'gold medals' are out there waiting to be won. Are you up for the challenge? **MF**

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