

Olympic Lessons to Make a Powerful Team

Nothing beats the Olympic games in showcasing the best in teamwork, individual performance and goal achievement. During the XXXI Olympiad in Rio, the United States earned the highest medal count among all participating nations. According to a post at teamusa.org, our country's 121 medals "are the most ever for a U.S. team in a non-boycotted Games."

For nonprofit leaders endeavoring to achieve visionary goals or strategic plans, Team USA's historic success can offer golden insights into the power of **impassioned teams and inspired training.**

Field your most powerful team

Early in my career, I worked with an executive director whose young organization was planning its first capital campaign. Earning the confidence of donors would require an unprecedented commitment to cultivation and community education by the staff and board.

In my youthful enthusiasm, I pushed for mandatory engagement by everyone on the staff and board in donor outreach. However, the wise executive director taught me a lesson I have never forgotten.

"If I plan to field my most powerful team," she admonished, "I must only enlist those who are eager to get results." And so it was.

In winning 121 medals in Rio, Team USA demonstrated what happens when we field our most powerful teams. Such a crew is comprised of members who have earned the distinction of representing the cause. Take gymnast Aly Raisman's story as an example.

When Aly returned to training after a year away from the sport, her longtime coach, Mihai Brestyan, refused to coach her. He insisted that before he would invest time getting the athlete into shape for the 2016 Olympics, she must prove her commitment to win. Aly would devote months of rigorous conditioning and determined perseverance before coach Brestyan would work directly with her. Raisman's passionate pursuit paid off when she won a gold medal in the women's team all-around and finished second to teammate Simone Biles in two additional events.

Nonprofit leaders can also ensure they are assembling the strongest teams possible. Here's how:

- **Develop the talent already in your midst.** Recent survey results from Bridgespan show that nonprofit organizations cite leadership development as "their most glaring organizational weakness." Providing quality training initiatives for current staff and board makes the difference in the short- and long-term success of the organization.

- **Make it an honor to participate.** Emphasize that the pursuit of visionary goals not only means expansion for your clients or community, but it is also clear evidence of team members' own professional growth. It is an honor to create positive change.
- **Give team members opportunities to *choose to excel*.** "Mandatory participation" can fail to elicit the perseverance required for goal achievement. Provide opportunities for individuals to stand and be counted; sign on the dotted line; or publish their names on social media (#IChooseToExcel), indicating their commitment to win. When reaching your visionary goals requires herculean effort, it is better to advance with an army of the ardent than to be delayed by the gripes of the disgruntled.

Inspired Training

The training routines of world-class athletes are the stuff of legends. We marvel at the unmatched stamina of Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all time. Even with more than a score of medals, he understands the necessity for ongoing, high quality training. Phelps is famously quoted as saying "I can't remember the last day I didn't train." To become a high performing nonprofit organization, not only is it important to field your best team, but it is important to provide them with high quality, inspired training.

Inspired training mandates that learners understand their precise requirements for greater performance and that training is structured to develop specific winning practices that give them the edge in competition. For example, to develop stamina, Phelps' coach helped him focus on endurance routines, managing his breathing, and allotting short recovery times between training intervals.

Reaching your organization's goals will require that you first assess which specific skills your team must develop (or master) in order to win. For example, if your goals include major fundraising initiatives, you might consider team competency-building that targets specific winning practices such as: case-based solicitations; using data to predict donor giving; or expanded board involvement in solicitations.

The Fruits of Inspired Training

I have witnessed the effects of inspired training in nonprofit organizations. The board of a well-established organization was challenged with raising millions of dollars to modernize its facilities and expand its services. Board members were successful professionals in their individual careers; but, as a team, they needed to strengthen confidence in their fundraising ability and to move toward their goals with greater urgency.

I worked with board leaders to determine which specific winning practices to focus on for maximum impact. To strengthen confidence in their fundraising abilities, we structured a training program that helped them focus on communicating the organization's unique niche in meeting constituent needs; and, asking in-person for major contributions. We also incorporated interactive exercises to incite board members to immediate action.

As a result, within 18 months, that board not only raised the funds to rehab the facilities, but they also realized their long-held dream to establish a new site for their highly sought-after services. In a recent email, the director of development invited me to tour the updated facility and visit the new program site. "Your work with our board helped to make this happen for us," she wrote. "And we would love to show you the fruits of your inspiration."

The Rio Olympics may be over, but we can learn tremendously from Team USA's models of achievement. By fielding impassioned teams and providing inspired training, your organization can also prepare to reach for and achieve the gold.