

Quality in cricket demands quality in management¹

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West Indies cricket! With its separate regions and politics, how do you manage it? Only with great difficulty, it seems. But the application of quality management principles is a sure way to bring about improvements.

A great deal could be written about the tactical management methods of achieving quality in a cricket team — for example, on psychological motivators such as setting targets, on planning and conducting such essentials as practice and fitness training, and on campaign preparation such as the identification of opponents' weaknesses and planning how to exploit them. But I prefer, here, to examine in more general terms the application of quality management principles such as strategic planning, continuous improvement, leadership, and feedback.

Having a quality culture does not mean that you never get anything wrong. It implies that you have mechanisms in place to detect errors and problems, that you make corrections, and that you make them at the root cause and not merely to cover up the symptoms.

Getting to root causes requires investigation, and this in turn demands questioning. So a questioning rather than a defensive attitude is crucial in all concerned.

Another thing about quality is that it involves everyone. No one is exempt. Just one person with the wrong attitude, who sweeps problems under the carpet rather than correcting them, is a risk to quality and to harmony among the participants. So training and leadership are important and, if we want a quality culture rather than relying on a few conscientious individuals, we must start at the top.

The Board needs to have a clear strategy for West Indian cricket. They must think strategically, which means that having defined a strategy (the easy part) they must plan the route to achieving it. So the Board must be seen to be implementing its strategy. This means deciding what needs to be done and who the best people are to do it. They must then put these 'best' people in the appropriate managerial positions, with clearly defined responsibilities and the authority to discharge them. The Board also needs to put systems in place to monitor progress, for there must be accountability for what is done.

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And where will these best people be found? Clearly they need to understand cricket. But the best umpires have not been test cricketers, and nor, with one or two exceptions, have the best commentators. Should we assume that a requirement for a Board executive or a team manager is that they played in test matches? What is required from a modern manager is leadership, and it is among leaders that we must seek our managers. If they have first-hand test experience, that is a bonus.

The best leaders have leadership in their personality, but it is also true that the attribute can be improved by training. A team manager should be selected for leadership qualities, for there is potentially a huge managerial pool from which his selection can be made. But it's not so easy in the selection of a team captain, for the pool is tiny.

Moreover, in sport the top job, captaincy, comes a great deal earlier than in business. Not only is it difficult to find a test player who is ready for test captaincy, but sometimes there is an inclination to appoint a captain as a reward for seniority in the team, or because of stature as a player, rather than because of a demonstration of leadership.

In tennis and golf, captains are often older and non-playing. But in cricket the captain needs to be on the field. Test captaincy is a huge responsibility, so captains — and potential captains — need to be given the benefits of management and leadership courses and exposure to respected leaders in other fields. They should not be expected to take on the huge leadership and ambassadorial responsibilities of international captaincy without the very best possible preparation.

But what of the team manager? He too should have the best possible training. Quality management recognises the importance not only of team working but also of team building — and team dynamics is not an unknown subject. A team has a life cycle with identifiable stages, just like any other living organism. It progresses (if conditions are favourable) from a group of people jostling for position, through a stage of formation, to maturity, harmony and productivity. Then, if it is not rejuvenated, it declines. Moreover, the individuals in it change, both because they too are going through development processes and because some leave and others enter.

So a manager must understand the development process itself. He must be able to recognise the stage of development of the team and that of each individual in it. He must be capable of judging what steps are necessary to bring the team and its individuals as rapidly as possible to productivity and to keep them there. And he must understand the styles of management which are appropriate to each stage of the life cycle, of team and individuals. More than that, he must be competent to apply the different management styles, because team building, though based on theoretical understanding, is a very practical affair. For all this, he must be prepared by experience and by training.

But the need for leadership is not confined to the selected leaders. In a successful team, leadership needs to be demonstrated by everyone. Players need to demonstrate it in motivating each other and in assessing themselves. In no endeavour these days is it sufficient to rely only on talent and a macho attitude; nor is it sufficient to practice and promote one's strengths, however formidable they may be. One needs self-awareness, a willingness to recognise one's weaknesses, and determined endeavour in improving on

them.

A fundamental quality-management principle is 'continuous improvement', which implies a culture of seeking out our failings, finding ways of improving them, making improvements, and then going through the process again ... and again, for ever. It is a process which denotes a culture; it is not a one-off thing.

Improvement begins with oneself. So players, including captains, need to be trained, encouraged and led to analyse their own skills and attitudes, and to seek and accept constructive critical guidance from others.

But, as in all quality matters, continuous improvement must be practiced and led from the top. Strategies need to be reviewed, and the people at the top who make them and who plan the high-level activities also need to be self-aware and to seek, consider and, when appropriate, act on critical advice.

A great danger in the quality improvement process is that we become smug when we believe we have achieved gains. But perfection is never achieved. However good we are, we can always get better — and if we do not endeavour to do so, we get worse. Continuous improvement is more an attitude, a culture, than a claim that the Holy Grail is within our grasp. Last winter we hit rock bottom in South Africa, and there cannot have been anyone who then denied the need for improvement. But then we drew the series with the powerful Australians. Many seemed to think that the team had made it back, neglecting the fact that the favourable results were achieved by a handful of players and mainly by one.

But a good series, even against the best, is not the measure of a good team. We need and want the team to play to its potential consistently. And for that a new culture is required, not just a shedding of the appalling attitude which prevailed in South Africa. Note that following the good showing against Australia, in the World Cup the team not only acquitted itself poorly but showed itself not to be a thinking team. When run rate was important, there seemed to be no recognition of this. Considerable improvement, in the team and among individuals, is not only possible but also essential. Culture change must be brought about so that future new entries are introduced immediately to a 'quality' order of things.

But changing culture is not easy, not an over-night affair; it takes time and commitment. And it must be led from the top. We need not just an improved team but an improved infrastructure. We must work on this by bringing quality management principles to our cricket.

A principle which is crucial in life, in business, and no less in cricket, is feedback. For this, communication which is both efficient and effective is essential. The team, the Board, and the selectors all need feedback from each other. When management is remote from their staff, dissatisfaction and disaffection occur. In a cricket infrastructure, if the team does not know, understand, or agree with the Board's strategy, things will not be well. If the Board does not receive feedback from the selectors, the management and the team on how their strategy is being implemented, they will be remote and uninformed.

So, imagine a square, with the Board, the selectors, the management and the team at its four corners. Now draw in not only the sides of the square but the diagonals as well, and imagine the public at the central point. With all the participants in the dance of West Indian cricket thus connected to each other, let them communicate across the lines that we have created, and let them dance together in the harmony of agreed strategic steps, mutual respect, attention to continuous improvement, and enlightened leadership.