



Fit for Purpose

We sometimes hear the term “fit for purpose” in reference to organisations, but how does it compare to our common understanding of personal fitness? We take a look at how we can leverage rules that apply to both...

Think of a time in your life where you were at your fittest, your absolute physical peak. When you think back to that period, what was it that pushed you to reach your physical best?

When you ask this question of most people, they will usually respond by describing feelings of motivation and dedication, a sense of competition, a burning desire to become better. People will often speak of the pride they had in their performance, their determination to meet a goal, or of being around others that helped reinforce their own efforts and successes.

In organisations, our best is often achieved when the same antecedents are present. When we have goals, when we're motivated, when we're surrounded by others striving to do their best and when we are determined to beat our competition, that's when we are at our best.

When getting our organisations “fit for purpose”, many of the same general rules apply to us that also apply when we are aiming to be our best in a physical sense.

Identify Natural Talent and Potential

If you're going to play basketball, it's generally advantageous to be tall; if you want to compete in sprinting, you need to be fast; and you won't ever become a champion table tennis player without quick reflexes. Getting the right people on board in your organisation is critical – both the individual and the organisation tend to work better when talent is directed where it is required. Great organisations accurately identify their own needs and then deliberately seek the talent to match those needs (both short and long term), getting the right people on board to drive their performance to new levels.

Remove Career-Ending Risks

Injured and impeded athletes do not perform to their potential. The same goes when getting an organisation fit for purpose – if factors beyond the individual's control are allowed to inhibit them, it's not only likely that you will not see their best performance, it's likely you will see them move on from the organisation or burnout.

Prevention is key. Whether it's eliminating physical risks, ensuring policies, procedures, processes and training are adequate for preventing adverse incidents, or providing adequate incentives and pathways to retain, motivate and develop key talent, it's important to identify and remove those barriers which stop your best being at their best.

Harness Innovation

Since 1891, the World Record for the 100m sprint has fallen from 10.8 seconds to its current 9.58 seconds. Such marked improvement doubtlessly stems from innovation – in training methods, technology, sports science and more. Similarly, Dick Fosbury revolutionised the sport of high jump in the 1960's by deciding to jump over the bar with his back facing it, the opposite of the conventional technique at the time.

Few would doubt innovations in sport have made possible things that weren't possible yesterday, and the same goes for business. Today we can communicate readily with customers and clients on the other side of the world at virtually no cost, businesses can take orders online while employees are still asleep, and we can send a message to thousands, if not millions, of people with the click of a button.

However so too can our competitors. Thus what being "fit for purpose" means is constantly evolving and being redefined. Today's best practice can quickly become obsolete, and if a competitive advantage is not sustainable, it can be lost. Staying ahead means embracing innovation and finding drivers of your business that will propel you forward and enable you to do what you couldn't before. It also means embracing those who bring innovation into your business – new skills, new ideas and new approaches. Their legacy, like Fosbury's, can often be observed long after in the achievements of others.

Creating a High Performance Culture

It's little surprise that we tend to achieve more when we are surrounded by high achievers or those who challenge us to be better. They inspire us and give us comparisons and targets against which we can measure our own achievement. They also create a norm – a behavioural expectation about the way things are done every day.

So how do you change an organisation's culture? Ultimately, behaviour is the driver of culture -culture is merely consistently observed behaviour over time. Creating new, functional behaviours and norms is one of the best ways of changing culture – it's harder to do things the wrong way when you're busy doing them the right way. This can be achieved in a number of ways – restructuring tasks, performance management, supervision, encouragement, role modelling, to name a few.

But just as you won't get physically fit by thinking or talking about doing exercise, you will only get an organisational culture fit for purpose by acting to change behaviour.

Nothing Replaces Hard Work and Passion

Finally, becoming fit for purpose relies on two simple ingredients – hard work and passion. You will struggle to find a high performer in any area who hasn't applied both of these in order to achieve. The good news is both tend to be contagious, particularly when leaders exhibit them personally and encourage them in others.

Footnote:

Fosbury never set a World Record and straddle-style jumpers still held the World Record for 5 years after the triumph of his 1968 Olympic Gold Medal before a jumper using the "Fosbury Flop" took the record. Straddle-style jumping was even used in World Record jumps up until 1978. But every single World Record jump since 1978 has utilised Dick Fosbury's innovation.

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