

Win, lose or draw: How to use feedback to make your team perform like the All Blacks

James Bowen and Brian MacNeice, co-Managing Directors of Kotinos Partners and authors of *Powerhouse – Insider accounts into the world's greatest high performance organizations*



The New Zealand All Blacks are the most successful sports team in the world. They have a remarkable record of having won almost 80% of the test matches they have ever played, they are on the verge of setting a new record for consecutive wins in International rugby (currently 17), they are the only nation to boast a winning record against every opponent they play, and they have held the number 1 ranking for longer than all other teams combined since the introduction of World Rugby rankings in 2003. Not bad for a team representing a nation of only 4.5 million people!

The All Blacks' formula for success has many components, however one of the most important of these is their use of feedback to drive performance. They operate what we call a *'feedback rich culture'*. We would point to four defining characteristics of this culture that are instructive in their own right and relevant for leaders in business.

1. **High transparency/high ownership:** In the All Blacks' feedback-rich environment, performance is transparent. Everyone sees how they – and others – are doing, all the time, and can connect their own performance to that of the team. Transparency brings two consequences – strong individual ownership of performance, and no hiding place for poor performers. The All Blacks use transparency to enable self-improvement – players are taught to analyze their own performance accurately and to drive their own improvement over time. Rather than being 'spoon fed' performance reviews by coaches, players review videos of each game on their own in advance of sitting down with the coaches, and identify their personal opportunities to improve. High transparency also allows the players to hold each other to account just as much as the coaches do. Players can and do challenge each other's performance, using the data, in the shared understanding that it's for the good of the team.
2. **Conversations as 'running commentary':** Enabled by high transparency, in the All Blacks' feedback rich culture, the amount of discussion on performance is far greater than the norm. Individually and collectively they maintain, in effect, a running commentary on performance as it occurs. They invest in learning from today to help them become better tomorrow. The All Blacks learn from every training session and every game, regardless of whether they win, lose or draw.

3. **Strong delivery capabilities:** The All Blacks understand there is a skill in delivering effective feedback, which for many people does not come naturally. They invest to ensure their people managers are schooled in the art of using feedback to drive improvement. They design training and review processes that ensure feedback happens in the right way, with the right frequency and linked to one goal – ensuring the organization reaches ever high standards of performance.
4. **'Just enough process', fit-for-purpose:** To facilitate the high volume of performance conversations, The All Blacks keep each individual conversation as short, sharp, and to the point as possible. Their operating principle is 'just enough process', which means that the purpose of each discussion is clear, and the amount of formality and structure is minimized. They understand that unnecessary bureaucracy creates a barrier to having conversations take place at all.

The All Blacks feedback rich culture enables their outstanding performance – historically, now and into the future. In our experience there is much that business leaders can learn from this approach to drive performance in their own teams over time.

James Bowen and Brian MacNeice are co-founders and Managing Directors of Kotinos Partners Limited, a niche advisory firm working to help CEOs and their teams achieve sustained high performance. They are also co-authors of Powerhouse – Insider accounts into the world's leading high-performance organizations, published in October 2016 by Kogan Page.

An abridged version of this article was published in the October 2016 journal of the Chartered Management Institute (CMI). See www.managers.org.uk for more information