The All Blacks guide to being successful (off the field)

The tricks and tactics of the New Zealand rugby team can lead to success whatever your chosen career, writes James Kerr



New Zealand's win-rate over the last 100 years is over 75 per cent

By James Kerr

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When England face the All Blacks on Saturday, they will line up against statistically the most successful sporting team in human history. New Zealand's win-rate over the last 100 years is over 75 per cent. It's a phenomenal record, and an achievement matched by no other elite team, in any code.

But back in 2004, something was wrong. The 2003 World Cup had gone badly, and by the start of the following year senior All Blacks were threatening to leave. Discipline was drunk and disorderly, and to make things worse, the All Blacks were losing.

In response, a new management team under Graham Henry began to rebuild the world's most successful sporting team from the inside out. They wanted a fresh culture that placed emphasis on individual character and personal leadership. Their mantra? 'Better People Make Better All Blacks'. The result? An incredible win-rate of just over 86pc, and a Rugby World Cup.

In early 2010, I had the privilege of going deep inside the All Blacks camp for five weeks alongside photojournalist Nick Danziger. It was a unique opportunity to study the way the best in the world stay on top of their game.

Here are five lessons in leadership I learnt.

1. Sweep the sheds

Before leaving the dressing room at the end of the game, some of the most famous names in world rugby – including Richie McCaw, Dan Carter and Mils Muliana – stop and tidy up after themselves. They literally and figuratively 'sweep the sheds'.

Former All Black Andrew Mehrtens describes it as an example of personal humility, a cardinal All Blacks value.

Though it might seem strange for a team of imperious dominance, humility is core to their culture. The All Blacks believe that it's impossible to achieve stratospheric success without having your feet planted firmly on the ground.



2. Follow the spearhead

In Maori, *whanau* means 'extended family'. It's symbolised by the spearhead.

Though a spearhead has three tips, to be effective all of its force must move in one direction. Hence the All Blacks mantra 'No D*******s', a term shamelessly stolen from the Sydney Swans.

The All Blacks select on character as well as talent, which means some of New Zealand's most promising players never pull on the black jersey – considered d*******s, their inclusion would be detrimental to the *whanau*.

3. Champions do extra

Former All Black Brad Thorn's mantra, 'Champions Do Extra', helped him become one of the single most successful players in rugby history.

The philosophy simply means finding incremental ways to do more – in the gym, on the field, or for the team. It is much like the philosophy of marginal gains used by Team Sky.

A focus on continual improvement, the creation of a continual learning environment, and a willingness to spill blood for the jersey was at the core of Graham Henry's All Black culture.



4. Keep a blue head

Following their arguably premature exit at the 2003 World Cup, the All Blacks worked with forensic psychiatrist Ceri Evans to understand how the brain works under pressure. They wanted to overcome their habit of choking.

'Red Head' is an unresourceful state in which you are off task, panicked and ineffective. 'Blue Head', on the other hand, is an optimal state in which you are on task and performing to your best ability.

The All Blacks use triggers to switch from Red to Blue. Richie McCaw stamps his feet, literally grounding himself, while Kieran Read stares at the farthest point of the stadium, searching for the bigger picture.

Using these triggers, the players aim to achieve clarity and accuracy, so they can perform under pressure.



5. Leave the jersey in a better place

The All Blacks have long had a saying: ‘leave the jersey in a better place’. Their task is to represent all those who have come before them – from George Nepia to Colin Meads, Michael Jones to Jonah Lomu, and all those who follow suit. An All Black is, by definition, a role model to schoolchildren across New Zealand.

Understanding this responsibility creates a compelling sense of higher purpose. It's a good lesson for us all: if we play a bigger game, we play a more effective game.

Better people make better All Blacks – but they also make better doctors and lawyers, bankers and businessmen, fathers, brothers, and friends.

James Kerr is the author of ***Legacy: What the All Blacks Can Teach Us About the Business of Life.*** *15 Lessons In Leadership (Published by Constable £12.99)*

How we moderate

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