

# THE LONG WIN: REDEFINING SUCCESS IN A COMPLEX WORLD

Our obsession with winning and competition, forecasts and predictions, and results and rankings may have suited the world a century ago, but it's now holding us back. Olympian, diplomat and coach [Dr Cath Bishop](#) explains why, in the face of current complex challenges, we need a 'long-win' approach.

How do you win a crisis? What does success look like when the world is turned upside down by unpredictable events? How can you beat uncertainty? These questions may have crossed minds in 2020, whether for Olympic athletes who saw the rock-solid certainty of a quadrennial Olympics taken away, or business leaders who saw their carefully crafted annual forecasts and targets swept aside by an unexpected pandemic. But are these the best questions to ask? What are we trying to win in the complex world we live in? How might we reframe the way we think, behave and interact to help us find a better way to explore our potential together?

While military, political and business worlds have focused on battles for supremacy and domination for centuries, this approach is no longer fit for the challenges of our times. Today, in our complex, interconnected world, 'winning battles' doesn't have the permanence it used to have. Outcomes and costs of winning are not just measured in financial and power terms, as we track wider social and environmental impacts which usually affect the 'winner' as much as the 'loser' – if it's even clear who the winner is.

It's clear that the greatest problems humanity faces – from climate change to inequality, global health to international trade and prosperity – require a collective response, an understanding of multiple perspectives and collaborative solutions. These are not

finite issues; they can't be 'won' or 'beaten' but require 'long-win thinking' – a more meaningful sense of purpose, a focus on learning and collaboration, and the prioritisation of human connections above all.

## WIRED FOR COLLABORATION

It is time to challenge the assumption that we are 'wired to win' and compete endlessly. There is part of our brain that responds to the experience of winning, giving us a dopamine hit and leaving us wanting more, albeit with diminishing returns. But we could choose to develop the part of our brains that responds to meaning and purpose, tapping into a stronger, longer-term source of motivation and more sustainable basis for performance.

We shouldn't overlook the findings of anthropologists that suggest it's cooperation, rather than brain size or the use of tools or aggression, that defined the first humans. There is no biological or psychological reason why we can't collaborate on a much greater scale if we choose to. Business CEO and author Margaret Heffernan sums up how the last 50 years of Western culture has focused purely on competition to make us 'bigger, tougher, meaner, more successful competitors'. She writes: 'the entire culture has been

caught up in a testosterone-fuelled feedback loop, we've been persuaded that if we aren't top dog, we must be underdogs; if we aren't winners, we're losers. What's striking in its absence is the equivalent effort to hone our collaborative gifts.<sup>i</sup>

## THE LONG WIN

We can work toward this more collaborative process using what I call 'the long win' approach. This offers a different path to success, through the 3Cs of clarity, constant learning and connection.

Success is based on **clarifying** our broader purpose: the social impact and change that we want to see. Research about how purpose-led businesses outperform their peers is extensive. However, too often, companies have not gone further than purpose statements. Purpose needs to be intrinsic to the way people think, behave and interact.

**Constant learning** fuels growth, adaptability and innovation. Doing so shifts focus away from results and outcomes that depend on unpredictable external factors.

**Connection** is the glue that links up all three Cs. If we don't connect as a team, it's hard to create clarity about purpose; if we don't connect with customers, colleagues and our wider network, then it's hard to keep learning, adapting and preparing for the uncertain crises and opportunities to come.

Learning to develop a collaborative mindset is a fundamental part of all three Cs of long-win thinking and requires a change of perspective, new priorities and different behaviours – which coaching can help to unlock. Three key areas need particular attention:

- exploring when employees and leaders make key decisions to compete rather than collaborate and recognising the structures and incentives that drive the mindset of the former rather than the latter;
- improving the quality of interactions, conversations and connections – which are the glue of teamwork, resilience and adaptability, and ultimately underpin performance;
- and recognising and rewarding behaviours that develop collaboration and build trust, create inclusive environments and contribute to the communities beyond the four walls of our (home/work) office.

## THE LONG-WIN APPROACH IN PRACTICE

As an Olympic rower, my early career was dominated by obsessive competition. It was self-defeating, and by the time we came to race the rest of the world at major championships we were burnt out, with a lot of human collateral damage along the way. A more collaborative high-performance culture later in my career enabled me to win medals when it mattered and to learn from fellow athletes as we supported and challenged each other. Despite competing for selection, it was in our shared interest for us all to maximise the gains we could make together.

When I worked as a diplomat, connections sat at the heart of our work as we sought to build deep alliances with partners who had seemingly unsurmountable barriers between them – cultural,

linguistic and political. Whatever the intractable disputes and complex issues we were negotiating, the most powerful tools we had at our disposal were human relationships and the conversations we shared. This allowed us the possibility of co-creating a new way forward in the darkest of conflict-affected situations. A large amount of time was spent trying to expand mindsets from a zero-sum mentality – where one side can only win at the cost of the other – to a win-win mentality. This allowed us to find solutions that, through compromise, resulted in gains for all and a collective step forward.

As much as we pored over complex, technical briefs ahead of a negotiation, progress relied mostly on the mindsets of those in the room. Whether it was persuading the bitterly opposed political representatives of the ethnic groups in Bosnia to work together to agree reforms to move their war-torn country forward, or trying to persuade the Spanish and Gibraltarians to work together more cooperatively, the common challenge was shifting mindsets to explore hitherto unexplored possibilities, opening up opportunities rather than closing them down.

This meant we needed to facilitate 'unlearning' old ways of seeing the world – in particular the need to find an enemy or opponent and defining success around their defeat. The crises and opportunities arising now should release us from our obsession with fixed results and predicted certainty. The question is whether our mindsets, behaviours and relationships are ready to be released.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr Cath Bishop is an Olympian, competing at three Olympic Games in rowing in Atlanta (1996), Sydney (2000) and Athens (2004), winning the World Championships in 2003 and an Olympic silver the following year. She worked as a diplomat for the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office for 12 years, with postings to Bosnia and Iraq. Cath now works as a business consultant, coach and speaker and teaches on executive education programmes at the Judge Business School, Cambridge University. Her new book, *The Long Win: The Search for a Better Way to Succeed*, is out now.

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