



6 LESSONS THE TIGERS CAN TEACH YOU ABOUT TURNING AROUND YOUR FIRM'S PERFORMANCE

BY SUE-ELLA PRODONOVICH, 16 August 2018

I'm passionate about many things but, unlike many of my countrymen, I'm not usually one to get too fired up about footy. (That's [Australian Rules Football](#) for my overseas readers).

That changed recently when I had the very good fortune of meeting [Richmond Football Club's](#) inspirational President, Australian Lawyer, and Lander & Rogers consultant, [Peggy O'Neal](#).

TAKING OVER TIGERLAND*

**This is a reference to perhaps the catchiest club song ever devised. You can listen to it [right here](#) but I'm warning you, you won't stop singing it for the next week.*

When Peggy became president of Richmond in October 2013, she was well and truly stepping into the hot seat. The Richmond Tigers were one of the oldest, most loved and most traditional footy teams in the country. But they hadn't won the flag since 1980. (Yep, that's really what it's called when you win the title.)

You can imagine how the then more than 60,000 passionate club members felt about that. They had gone from powerhouses to perpetual also-rans, from fear-inspiring to feeble.

And now here was a woman - and originally an American one at that - taking over one of the most Australian and male-dominated sports institutions in the country. But Peggy and Richmond's powers that be had a plan for turning things around....

Lesson One for your firm:

Professional services firms tend to appoint leaders from within their own ranks. That's not always a bad thing; but it's not always a good thing either. Sure, when you choose a fellow professional to lead the firm, the boss gets that instant connection and respect that can only come from knowing what it is the team does each day. But when you appoint an outsider they bring different perspectives and different ways of doing things. And, if you appoint someone from comes direct from client side that includes having first-hand knowledge of what drives your clients and how your clients make decisions.

LOOKING FOR THE RIGHT QUALITIES

It doesn't matter whether it's the sporting, professional or political world: when a regime changes the first instinct of the new rulers is almost always to wield the axe. And when the Tigers weren't performing few things would have been easier than to blame the coach, Damien Hardwick.

In fact, by 2016, the calls for Hardwick's sacking had reached fever pitch as the Tigers' position continued to slide. There were a lot of calls for Peggy's head too - including from a rival board faction.

But Peggy and the Richmond board didn't think the coach was the problem. They knew they had a good one. "Some things had to change but he wasn't one of the things that had to change," she later told [The Australian](#). So they stuck to their guns and backed Hardwick, even in the face of extreme pressure.



Why they did this was because they knew Hardwick was a gem: he had an unusual capacity for self-reflection and a willingness to listen to, and take on board, constructive feedback. This was pretty rare for someone in a high-stakes, highly competitive field like footy. So they encouraged him to use this to his advantage, even sending him to Harvard University to complete a course on leadership.

Lesson Two for your firm:

When things aren't going to plan, most professional services firms will look to "shake things up". (We've all been there). That often includes getting rid of the people in charge and replacing them with people perceived as more decisive. (We've all been there too.)

Often what's needed instead is to keep the current leadership team and to focus on giving them what they need to succeed.

Another problem I see is that too often senior professionals are so competitive they'll see any kind of coaching as a slight upon their abilities. That's a problem if you're ever going to get better. Good leaders listen and learn.

WE'RE IN THIS TOGETHER

Another focus for Richmond became the community around them. In sport, there is always a result and there are always very interested people who want to give you their opinion on that result, especially if it's a loss. The temptation can be to hide away from them. Richmond's management made a point of mixing with the people who mattered most - their fans. Hardwick would get a coffee each day and actively speak to the people who watched the game and had an opinion.

More than that, the Richmond management were happy to let the fan base into the bigger picture, even when that didn't make them happy. For instance, when they set about retiring debt ahead of spending cash on players and supporters.

They also focused on breaking down any barriers between players within their team. Richmond has a couple of absolute star players in Dustin Martin and Trent Cotchin (both have won the Brownlow Medal, the AFL's highest individual honour for the best player in the season) but they're known for being close to their junior teammates.

They also decided that the on-field team would only ever function if the off-field team functioned well too. So, just as they had fought hard to retain Damien Hardwick, they set out to retain quality people working in behind the scenes roles, such as marketing and support.

Lesson Three for your firm:

Building success means bringing out the best in a lot of people, not just your management team. For people to feel properly involved, engaged and motivated, they need to be let into the bigger picture. They also need to feel as though their commitment and hard work will be properly rewarded.

Too often the hierarchy of a professional services firm gets in the way of that - juniors don't feel supported or encouraged and certainly don't have the ear of the more experienced staff. You can learn a little about how I think you can fix that [here](#).

LEARN FROM YOUR LOSSES

One of the most important things Richmond gave its team was a soft landing for failures. That's different to accepting failure. It's more about accepting that you don't always win but



what matters more is how you respond to it. Richmond vowed to never lose the same way twice. (Oh no, says my sister Kitty, a West Coast Eagles supporter, we're done for!).

Lesson Four for your firm:

Professionals are often high achievers who'll never admit that things are anything but perfect. That's a major problem when it comes to analysing failures and learning from them. If you don't win a pitch or if a matter doesn't turn out the way you'd hoped, don't blame. Instead, call a debrief where you analyse what went wrong, how you could have done better and what will happen next time. When you do, focus on observational research too, such as the demeanour of the people you met with.

BE MINDFUL

Finally, and maybe most importantly, Richmond began practising mindfulness. But what does that mean exactly? It means being in the here and now, focusing on just what's in front of you and giving your all only to the task at hand. They even brought in a mindfulness coach to help the players master this skill.

You see, in footy as in most things in life, thinking too much can result in paralysis. If you're concerned about the next move - or the move after that - you're not focusing 100% on what you're doing now.

There came a point where the Richmond team recognised they simply couldn't work any harder. There also came a point where they recognised that, even though they were doing the basics well, they were becoming a little robotic and dispassionate. They needed to get back to giving it all.

By encouraging players to live in the moment, Hardwick gave them the freedom to attack the ball and play the way they wanted.

Lesson Five for your firm:

If you're like most professionals I know you're already working very hard. In fact, you're probably already close to, or even at, capacity. So working harder isn't a recipe for success; it's a recipe for misery. So before you start putting in more hours think about how you can bring yourself back into the moment so that the time you do spend is super-productive.

This could be through a physical object: many of the Richmond players wear a wristband that reminds them to focus on the now (you'll see a lot of athletes doing this). It could be by blocking those constant emails and phone calls that disrupt your day. It could be by forgetting about the constant elevator pitches and the noise and just focusing on authenticity.

Whatever it is, I can assure you that it shouldn't mean spending more time at the desk. Being constantly at work and on is no kind of life.

AND THE RESULT...

As I've already mentioned, the 2016 AFL season was a bad one for the Tigers. But things clicked in 2017, especially at the business end of the year. On Saturday 30 September, they defeated the Adelaide Crows to win the grand final - their first flag in 37 years. Earlier that week Dustin Martin cemented his superstar status by winning the Brownlow Medal. He also won the best on ground that day. And one of the first people he [hugged in celebration](#) was Peggy O'Neal.

In 2018, the Tigers are competition leaders and favourites to win back to back flags. And their membership base? A cool 100,000 supporters, the first club to ever reach six figures.



Lesson Six for your firm:

Success takes time and involves many moving parts but once it arrives, success usually breeds success.

WANT MORE?

Richmond FC are just one example of how a business in an unrelated field has important parallels in the world of professional services. If you'd like to talk about anything here - or find out more about real life case studies - [Get in touch](#).

Sue-Ella is the Principal of [Prodonovich Advisory](#), a business dedicated to helping professional services firms sharpen their business development practices, and attract and retain good clients.

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