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HOW ORGANIZATIONS EMPOWER TALENT

Leadership lessons from the rugby pitch..

Leadership Lessons from the Rugby Pitch

Conversations
FOR TOMORROW



STACEY FLUHLER

New Zealand Rugby
Union international



BREAKING THROUGH RUGBY'S GLASS CEILING

Stacey Fluhler was first selected for the Black Ferns (New Zealand's women's rugby union side) Sevens team in 2016, and won the HSBC World Rugby Women's Sevens Series thrice ('16/'17, '18/'19, and '19/'20) and the Rugby World Cup in 2017 and 2022 with the full squad. Stacey was named International Women's Player of the Year in the 2021 NZ Rugby Players' Association Players' Awards [voted for by the players]. In Sevens, she won a gold medal at the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, gold at the Gold Coast (2018), and bronze at the Birmingham (2022) Commonwealth Games.

Stacey holds a bachelor's degree in Health, Sport, and Human Performance and is currently completing a postgraduate diploma in Business Studies from Massey University, New Zealand.

The Capgemini Research Institute spoke to Stacey about breaking down the barriers in the male-dominated world of professional sport, sustaining high physical performance, and the lessons business leaders can take from the sporting environment.



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EMERGING AGAINST THE ODDS

Which challenges did you face as a female athlete in professional rugby?

— In New Zealand, rugby is a male-dominated sport. I know a lot of girls whose families are unhappy about their daughters joining a rugby team; it's viewed as too aggressive and physical. Luckily, I did not face this challenge – rugby runs in my family. But getting the wider support, including financing, was challenging while I was still at school. It took a number of wins against bigger, more established schools to convince the school or the board of our talent as a female team.

Furthermore, I experienced body-image issues, with people in my community looking at me weirdly because of my shape. This can be traumatic for some girls and young women. It is important to have a good support network of family members, friends, and coaches who are on your side and will help you ignore the negative comments and behavior. Another issue was that I had to undergo five or six surgeries during my 10 years in professional rugby. The pain and recovery time are very testing for an athlete; and you need to draw strength from within and without, by sharing your anxieties openly with your support network.



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Who or what are your biggest sources of inspiration, on and off the field?

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— My biggest inspiration is just to enjoy life – if I'm having fun doing what I'm doing, I don't feel like it's work. I have other motivations as well, of course: I get paid; I get to represent our country; I make my family proud, wearing my last name on the back of my shirt. But my biggest inspiration is to do myself justice and make sure I'm enjoying the journey.

What is the most important thing that life as a successful rugby player has taught you?

— I have lived by the motto, “Nothing worth having comes easy.” I've been successful, but few people know the price I've paid for it: the injuries, the blood, sweat, tears – everything that goes on behind the scenes.

Of course, there have been losses along the way. But you never fail completely; losing can teach you a lot. Every time we've lost in the black jersey, we've grown from the experience and, ultimately, become better as players and as a team. There have been times when it hasn't been easy, but I never forget that I have been given this opportunity to show the world who I am and what I can do. I remember that when I walk out onto the pitch to play in front of thousands of people in the ground and millions more on television.



STRIVING FOR GENDER PARITY IN SPORTS AND BUSINESS

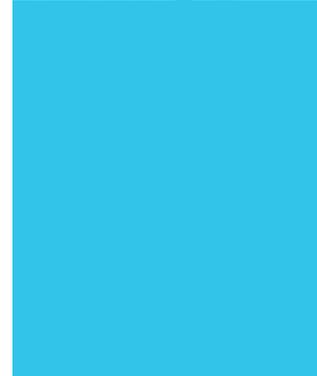
Is it easier now to make a career as a woman in professional sport? What advice would you give to a talented young sportswoman?

— Women's sport has gained considerable momentum over the last 5–10 years. This success is down to a strong talent pool, greater availability of funding, increased public interest, and, as a consequence, higher spectator numbers. On the back of this increased support, we've been able to break down barriers in terms of asking for adequate salaries and getting more opportunities to play in different locations around the world. It is our responsibility to showcase to younger girls and boys that your dreams are achievable if you focus and persevere.

I would suggest younger players work hard on keeping up their internal motivation: be persistent, be passionate, and never be afraid. Those three qualities are a big part of my success.

What do you think business leaders can learn from the rise of women's rugby?

— My biggest takeaway is to develop a clear vision: find something you really want to fight to achieve. In terms of teamwork, ensure that everyone is aligned through constant communication. There's no real hierarchy in our team, and it gives us confidence to be treated as being on a par with our management and coaches. We senior players, especially, really interact with them as equals, discussing strategy and tactics with the same weight given to our opinions. For example, if we feel training is going on for too long, or there's something in our schedule we want to change, we have the confidence to speak with the management or coaches and effect a change through frank and open dialogue.



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MAKING A WINNING TEAM

How does the New Zealand rugby team instill a sense of belonging in new players?

— When we have a new team member, we try to get to know the person before we get to know the player. We have several ice-breaker sessions in which they introduce themselves, answer a couple of fun questions, maybe perform a song or dance routine, then talk a little about where they're from and their family.

We want people to come into the playing environment and not be afraid to speak up or to be themselves. New players might initially be a bit starstruck, suddenly playing with older teammates who were their idols not long ago, so we need to break down the “awe” barrier and connect with them.

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We have a buddy system in the team to help new players settle in. We have a set time where we take turns to share our personal stories, going more in-depth about the type of person we are, how we react to certain situations, why we talk the way we do, why we're shy or outspoken. This helps us to understand each other better and nurtures a sense of togetherness.

Our team is more successful because of this togetherness. We know how to deal with each other on and off the field. An example is how best to react when someone makes an on-field error. Some people like instant feedback, and we try to talk them through the issue straight away, so they can put it right. Others prefer some time to get over it before we go into why it happened.

Our management understands we require a personal life outside of work. When players are struggling, there's always support, and time off if we need it, because being a professional athlete is a pretty hard life, at times.



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How can businesses learn from sporting setups in terms of boosting performance and keeping motivation up?

— Our success is based on honest discussions - and, when necessary, tough conversations - through the right feedback channels. Of the 21 girls in our squad, eight are part of the leadership group. So, a third of the team is in

constant communication with each other and, every few weeks, with the management. Having regular review sessions helps everyone, too. After every tournament we play, we discuss what went well, what didn't, and how can we fix it? And that includes team management and leadership; they make the rules, but they're open to feedback, too.

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Our success is based on honest discussions - and, when necessary, tough conversations - on-field error.”

The central point is that we all understand why we are playing and that we want to do our country proud, play well, and win. Once every team member understands their individual and team motivations – and has those aligned – you have a powerful force for success.



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