

# Leadership Lessons From Usain Bolt

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## A record-breaking athlete teaches a business school audience his secrets of success.



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Athletes who are the best in the world give us tremendous joy. We get incredible satisfaction when our favorite teams or athletes excel and prevail. Can managers learn anything from such stellar accomplishment? Judging from a recent event at IMD, the global [business school](#) based in [Switzerland](#), the answer is a resounding yes.

Usain Bolt is the fastest sprinter in human history. He set three world records at the [Beijing Olympics](#) last year, and he followed up this year by breaking world records in the 100-meter and 200-meter races while winning his first gold medals at a world championship.

Reaching such heights has required exceptional motivation, critical thinking and focus. Bolt turned early setbacks into advantages, overcame all his relevant weaknesses and developed outstanding drive. Any manager can benefit from working to do the same in his own life.

If a coach hadn't recognized Bolt's special gift of speed when he was a child, he might have stopped at being a reasonably good cricket player. That was the sport he started out in. Bolt was advised to concentrate on the 400-meter foot race. He had enough self-knowledge and self-confidence to quickly realize that his strength lay not there but in the 100-meter dash. That went against conventional thinking, for Bolt is six-foot-five, and people that tall are supposed to be best at a longer distance. The Olympics and recently concluded world championships have proved him right. He was perceptive enough about his own abilities to know when to accept feedback and when to ignore it. Can you say the same about yourself?

In management training, you often find a heavy emphasis on what is called gap analysis, encouraging executives to focus on improving the weak points, or gaps, in their performance. That is almost always the wrong advice. If you are a great writer but a terrible speaker, focus on writing even better and get someone else to do the speaking. Often the things we are bad at are the things we don't really want to do. A recipe for success is to do fewer of the things you don't like and concentrate on what you're good at. Are you playing to your strengths? You need confidence in yourself and, unless you're the chief executive officer, you need an organization that will support you.

After going professional, Bolt experienced a series of injuries and setbacks that might have discouraged anyone. But without those setbacks he would never have achieved the focus, discipline and pacing of a champion.

What distinguishes highly successful people is not that they face fewer setbacks. We all face obstacles in our lives. Successful people have an ability to take a positive view that allows them to learn from setbacks and draw motivation from them. Steve Jobs, of [Apple](#) ( [AAPL](#) - [news](#) - [people](#) ), likes to say that had he not dropped out of college, the Macintosh computer would not have been as great a machine. He also credits his current success at Apple to having been fired by the company 14 years

ago. And facing the possibility of death from pancreatic cancer has helped him focus on the things he has wanted most to achieve in life, he says.

As Bolt spoke to the audience at IMD, joy rang through his words and demeanor. "I love competing," he said. "If you enjoy what you are doing, then it is much easier to be successful." Of course he is joyful after having become a star. But how does he maintain that spirit through endless grueling training sessions? It became evident as he spoke that he has an ability to see the end result. What about you? Are you passionate about going into the office every day? Surely you have laborious and grinding days. Can you see past the bad times and keep fixed on the potential end result?

At just 23, Bolt has reached extraordinary heights. What else could he potentially wish to achieve? In answer to that question, he said, "Success for me is just continuing to do great things. I am not fully successful. For me, I will be a great athlete if I can do this year after year."

What about the executive who sees his or her career as at its limit, with no prospect for further advancement? In some situations you have to work at motivation. Bolt did. After a disappointing second-place finish at the 2007 world championships in Osaka, he and his coach realized he must build up his physical strength. He admittedly dreaded all the working out and time in the gym it would require. But he realized the necessity of it, he buckled down and he did it.

He also realized that even the most routine jobs can be made interesting if we can turn them into games. The trick is to treat the component parts of the job as a series of challenges and then to set small goals, one after another. Identify something you want to do a little bit better, a little bit differently and then work on it incrementally.

Usain Bolt has masterfully learned what it means to play to win. You can too.

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