

Being World's Best

Jonty Rhodes on the leadership lessons he learned from Cricket

One of the greatest cricketers of our time, Jonty Rhodes is a true sportsman. Known as the live wire of South Africa's national cricket team for over a decade, his fielding ability defied expectations – and gravity. Although his prowess as a batsman was formidable, it was his fielding that reflected some of the finest attributes achievers, in any walk of life, can hope for: the ability to never say die, never give up, to intend to achieve the impossible, and to sustain energy levels that will carry teams to victory. Yet,

Sri Lanka's 1996 World Cup-winning strategy embodies what it means to drive change and innovation in the marketplace



what many people do not realise is that Mr Rhodes was actually a better hockey player than he was a cricketer – or that he excelled, as well, at football and tennis. He played both sports at the state and university level, but a twist of fate – the fact that post-apartheid South Africa was able to re-join world cricket a few years before it began competing again in hockey – meant that the sport chose him, rather than the other way around. Drawing on his experiences as a player, and, until very recently, as coach of the Mumbai Indians IPL team, Mr



Rhodes reflected on leadership – and winning – on the cricket field, and in life.

SEIZING THE FRONT-RUNNER'S POSITION

In cricket or in business, there are broadly three ways of dealing with the competition. You can say 'We don't do things that way', and turn your back on what is taking place in the market. Or you can imitate what the front-runner is doing – but then, you can at best hope to keep up. The third way – and the one that can potentially win you the market – is to actually initiate the changes required to be the front-runner. Nothing embodies this better than the World Cup-winning Sri Lankan team of 1996.

Cricket today has an intensity that was not always there. Especially in T20s, every ball can now potentially win or lose a match – a far cry from the game's more languid days. Most people attribute the change to the game's newest format, and indeed, it has helped bring in new skill-sets and fitness levels. However, the real shift in the game goes back much further, to the 1996 World Cup. From dead-last just four years earlier, Sri Lanka caught everyone by surprise. They managed to win despite playing very few games in the run-up: with no real 'stars', Sri Lanka attracted little interest from broadcasters, and therefore, no one wanted to play them. What won them the cup was a unique strategy that ended up changing world cricket. Until then, the first 15 overs of an innings was about 'playing it safe' – preserving wickets and laying a platform for the 'finishers' to smash the ball around in the last few overs. What Sri Lanka did instead was to back its openers, and especially Sanath Jayasuriya, to hit every ball, scoring briskly. If, by the end of the first 15 overs, they had managed to score 95-110 runs for the loss of, say, 3 wickets, it was often enough to take the game away from the opposition. This

Like other great leaders, Hansie Cronje would truly lead from the front, not asking his team for anything he was not prepared to do himself



one, simple innovation changed the game forever.

LEAD FROM THE FRONT...

Leadership is the ability to get the best out of your team, but it also means leading from the front. For years, South African was fortunate to have in Hansie Cronje a captain who was first and foremost a leader. (While not every leader is a captain – leadership can come from anywhere in the team – every captain must be a leader.) More than his skills as a player, it was his man-management and people skills that made all the difference. What was unique about Mr Cronje was his ability to see that every player needed to be treated differently. Until then, batsmen, bowlers, and wicketkeepers all followed the same fitness training: they all just ran. In contrast, he, together with Kepler Wessels, introduced a new and specialised training regime. He would personally spend hours in the gym, even training with Zola Budd, the champion long-distance runner. Never would he ask the team to do something that he would not do himself – and at the end of a long day, he would be the one still up and about, running hard. In the Indian context, we see something similar today in Mahendra Singh Dhoni, who pioneered the 'strong-and-fit' approach in India, and

in Virat Kohli, who is not only incredibly fit, but also leads by example with his batting, scoring thousands of runs.

Mr Rhodes only came to appreciate the true quality of Mr Cronje's leadership years later, after his unfortunate death in a plane accident. Having moved on to a corporate role, Mr Cronje had become a popular speaker at various business, sporting and school events. He would always have 8-10 stock 'lessons' or 'stories' to share with his audience, which would vary according to whom he was speaking, and over the years, Mr Rhodes became quite familiar with each of them. However, flipping through the books in Mr Cronje's study, Mr Rhodes came across a sentence that was not only under-lined, but also highlighted and circled: 'If things went well, YOU did it; if things went OK, WE did it, but if things went badly, I did it.' Never once had he heard Mr Cronje actually say those words, but in fact, they summed up his entire philosophy and leadership style. Essentially, when the chips were down, that is what got someone or the other to come through and win games for South Africa.

...AND PLAY TO YOUR PEOPLE'S STRENGTHS

Perhaps Hansie Cronje's single-greatest leadership skill was that he got his players to build on their strengths, rather than on correcting their weaknesses. By honing-in on areas where his young, malleable players excelled, and by giving them the permission to see just how far they could go with their skills – while also allowing them to fail and learn from that failure – he built a truly world-class team. In most organisations, the tendency is to identify shortcomings, and to then try and overcome those. Too often, the emphasis is on avoiding failure, and on moulding generalists who can do a competent – but not necessarily game-winning – job. Yet,



unless people have the freedom to fail, it is very difficult for them to achieve real success. With a lot of practice at the nets, Mr Rhodes could have been a half-decent bowler who would fill up a few overs here and there. Instead, Mr Cronje saw that he loved to field, and was outstanding at it, so he told him to only concentrate on that. Similarly, he had a reliable fast bowler, Fanie de Villiers, who could bowl a mean outswinger, but who loved, most of all, to break a batsman's toes with his Yorkers. Rather than guiding him to practice his outswing, Mr Cronje told him to perfect his toe-crushing skills. In both cases, the result was the same: exponential growth, and match-winning skills. A side-benefit, for Mr Rhodes, was that never for a moment did the hard work of fielding practice feel like work – it was something that he just loved so much.

FOCUS ON THE PROCESS – NOT THE OUTCOME

As both player and fielding coach, Mr Rhodes focused solely on processes, not on outcomes. Try as hard as you may, you can never guarantee results – after all, even a poor umpiring decision can swing the game away from you. What you can guarantee is that the right processes get followed, day-in

Too often, organisations focus on overcoming weaknesses and avoiding failure, whereas what they should be doing is playing to people's strengths



and day-out. This matters because, in cricket as in life, it is the little things that make all the difference. T20 games in particular often boil down to the last over, often even the last ball. Contrary to what anyone might say, even a single run can separate victory from defeat, so nobody should be thinking, 'What difference can I make to the result?' In 2006, chasing a record 434 against Australia in a one-day game, South Africa improbably got to the final over needing just 2 runs to win. The catch was that it was 9 wickets down, with Makhaya Ntini – a great bowler but a hopeless batsman – standing at the crease. At the other

end, the fiery Brett Lee, then in his prime, was running in hard, hurling fireballs. Miraculously, Mr Ntini managed to put bat on ball, crossing over for a single, and allowing the more experienced Mark Boucher to hit the winning runs off the penultimate ball. Had he not done so, the game was lost, so, truly, Mr Ntini's one run was what got South Africa over the line.

This is why, as coach, Mr Rhodes would constantly be on the

lookout for whether, when someone missed a ball or dropped a catch, he was in position, was ready for the ball, and whether he had the right 'body language'. The fielder's job, like a goalkeeper's, is to stop the ball from running away, and if all eleven players stop just 1 run each, it means the batsmen need to score 11 fewer runs. Against the West Indies at the 2003 World Cup, South Africa lost by 2 runs, with Brian Lara cracking a century. En route to that 100, he hit a boundary that Mr Rhodes just about managed to touch, but which he could not stop. Had he just let the ball go, he would forever have been haunted by the thought that he could have stopped it, and possibly won the match for his team. By giving it his all, diving at full stretch – and only getting his finger-tips on it – he knew for certain that there was nothing more he could have done. Not making that effort would have been a failure; having tried and not succeeded, however, is merely part of the learning process. Focusing on that process, and learning from failure, is what eventually gets results. ■

Jonty Rhodes is a former Cricketer and Coach. This article is based on Mr Rhodes' presentation at the 22nd Annual CFO Roundtable in Guwahati in February 2018