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Run with the Bulls

FORGET THE SO-CALLED GURUS: Brewing boss-turned-adman Kevin Roberts says that the world's top sporting teams, not expensive consultants, hold the secret to running successful companies

Notebook in hand, adman Kevin Roberts went up to a sweat-stained Michael Jordan, star of the Chicago Bulls and pioneer of levitation, asked a question about winning, and came away with the following gem: "I wouldn't mind losing to myself because then I'd be the second-best player in the world as well as the best," said Jordan, apparently without a hint of arrogance.

Roberts, 49, now is now the chief executive officer of Saatchi & Saatchi worldwide but is probably better known to Australians as the long-serving, British-born former CEO of brewer Lion Nathan, had to think about that one. But what the Emperor of Air was saying, in an oblique way, was that the only standard of play he can tolerate is his own world-leading one. And if he can't manage that himself, at least he has the consolation that no one can match him even at second-best.

This nugget of wisdom will appear in Roberts' book (its title is not yet decided) on the management of successful organisations. Due to publication in early 1999, the book's main theme is that you can junk the highly paid advice of most management gurus because real wisdom lies elsewhere. The secret to management, it claims, rests with winning sports teams like the Chicago Bulls, baseball's Atlanta Braves, gridiron's Dallas Cowboys, soccer clubs like Bayern Munich and Manchester United, the Australian women's netball team and men's Test cricket team, rugby league's Manly Sea Eagles, union's All Blacks, and Team New Zealand (the crew that brought back the America's Cup), to name a few of the most winning assemblies of talent studied for the book.

Roberts and his co-researchers, Waikato University's management and human resources faculty at Hamilton, have interviewed them all, notebooks in hand and tape recorders running. What they heard could transform management theory – an area long overdue for a spring-clean, in Roberts' unapologetic opinion.

Mediocrity: "Most companies are managed by fear and by mediocrity," says Roberts, at Saatchi's funkily decorated Auckland headquarters in a converted woolstore. "Everybody preaches leadership but we've only got managers," he snorts. "Take strategy; everybody talks about strategy but I believe the success of an organisation is in direct inverse proportion to the amount of time it spends on strategic planning."

Roberts takes to heart the lessons he has learned from the Bulls and others. In running Saatchi's 6000 employees in 161 far-flung offices in 90 countries, he doesn't even try to manage. Instead he behaves like a Bob Fulton, coach of the Sea Eagles. "I spend no time at all managing," he says proudly. "I spend my time coaching, building. My task is to make eagles fly."

From the way the iconoclastic Roberts describes the advertising company, that's quite a task. He has obviously taken lessons from astronaut Buzz Aldrin (pictured). "Over 2000 of those employees [the creative ones] could be best described as overgrown adolescents. They are right-brained, desperate to be liked, wear their hearts on their sleeves, lack formal education in many cases and are almost all aesthetically based. They are individuals, not team players.

Roberts says all this affectionately. He cherishes talent, however cranky it may be. "We never give negative feedback from clients," he says. "People can't be creative if they are frightened."

Emotional: He believes this is one of the secrets of winning organisations. They positively love high-performing athletes, even though they can be emotional, impatient and even bad-tempered. "All these are virtues. You don't try and manage inspirational players. You stretch them."

The adman, who sits on the New Zealand Rugby Football Union board, certainly regards just-retired All Black skipper, the never-say-die Sean Fitzpatrick, as an inspirational player. "When the other players went on the field with Sean, they felt bullet-proof," he says approvingly.

Roberts has always been a sports nut and a leader. "He was always captain of the cricket team," says a contemporary, Clive Gilson, now a professor of management and a co-researcher. And when he attends a big rugby match, Roberts watches as though he were the coach, memorizing every play.

Self-confessedly unhappy in the last couple of years of his eight-year tenure at Lion Nathan and after nearly two decades in the drinks industry, Roberts is clearly reveling in his globetrotting role at Saatchi. (He has offices and houses in New York, London and Auckland.) At Lion Nathan he was rarely out of a suit; at Saatchi he hardly ever wears one, except when addressing Mikhail Gorbachev's World Forum, as he did on October 30. More recently he was even invited by the Anglican bishop of Christchurch to give a speech on the future of Christianity. "How obscenely cool," he grins.

Other secrets of winning sports organisations? For a start, none of them has a strategic plan. They do, however, steer by a common vision supported by objectives that they review weekly, monthly and annually. The organisations also understand that they entertain the fans or die. For them, grinding out dull victories is commercial suicide. "We don't want 9-8 victories by the All Blacks,"

Roberts admonishes (although most New Zealanders would right now be happy with any victory).

The Chicago Bulls *et al* also cherish their roots instead of ripping them up at regular intervals, as so many companies do in the name of reinventing themselves. Those long-established rituals, which MBA graduates often mock, are in fact the bedrock of winning sporting teams. “These organizations are built on a sense of community,” says Roberts. This is why he is pleased that the New Zealand RFU has restored the All Blacks’ famed “schoolboy” cap, dumped years ago but now revived for its heritage. As you leave his office, you find yourself walking between a parade of framed and autographed All Black jerseys on the wall – including one belonging to Fitzy.