

Why You Should Fill Your Company With 'Athletes'



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At our company, we work to fill our roster with “athletes.” I don’t mean this necessarily in the physical sense, although it turns out that quite a few of our members are literal athletes – we have a national-class triathlete, I have a personal interest in competitive and recreational bodybuilding, and there are multiple marathoners, bikers, soccer, and basketball players, CrossFit enthusiasts, etc. on staff. We also have a companywide interest in health and fitness, which we call “[Fishbowl](#) FIT.” But when I advise people to seek and hire athletes, what I am really referring to is the athlete traits (akin to leadership traits) that make any individual an exceptional hire. They are as follows:

- 1. They have the drive to practice a task rigorously, relentlessly, and even in the midst of failure until they succeed.** Athletes are tenacious—they seldom or never give up. They also have a strong work ethic and the ability to respect and deal with the inevitable issues of temporary pain (along with the intuition to know when the cause of the pain is an issue too serious to safely ignore.)
- 2. Athletes achieve their goals.** If one avenue is blocked, they find another path to success. If their physical strength has given out, they learn to work smarter, not harder. As they learn to become more effective they become more efficient.
- 3. Athletes develop new skills.** Even though an athlete is highly specialized at certain skills, such as speed, blocking, or hand-eye coordination, they are also good at adapting to scenarios that call for cross-functional skills.
- 4. Athletes are exceptional entrepreneurs.** As you consider new hires, you will likely discover that business athletes are often former (or current) entrepreneurs. Whereas people from large corporate environments may tend to be specialized in their skills and single-minded in their objectives, a business athlete is equipped to see the bigger vision of all that goes into making a company thrive. They can think strategically and are tuned in to the “big picture” and the long-term goals. They also know how to put the strategy into action.
- 5. Athletes strive for balance.** Too much junk food and too little sleep will not contribute to a healthy company or a winning performance. Their bodies must be strong and in good condition, so athletes understand that they can’t cheat the system for long and expect positive results. A true business athlete will respect the laws of balance in energy, health, sleep, and nutrition (as well as the business corollaries) that will allow them to succeed and to do so not only in the present but for the long term as well.

6. Athletes work well with partners and in teams. Athletes know how to leverage the unique and complementary strengths of each member of their team. They know that cutting down a teammate or disrespecting a partner will only contribute to an organization's demise. In fact, an athlete will typically put the needs of the team or a partner on equal par or even ahead of their own needs. How do you find and hire these athletes? Consider the questions you ask in interviews about outside projects, other interests, community service, the ability to focus on pet tasks, and the concepts of teamwork. And, as always, be keen to the ways you can recognize and hire for propensity instead of for current demonstrable traits. Many of my own strongest players have never previously excelled at a physical sport. They never knew they were athletes. That's an important aspect of hiring athletes: The world's best athletes are not necessarily discovered; they are trained.

How are you finding, fostering, and training the champion athletes on your own business team? Everyone deserves the opportunity to discover the "athlete" within themselves.