



Building high-performance teams: An Interview with Marc Sagal of Winning Mind and Enhanced Performance Systems

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Do you need help developing highly productive IT teams? Enter Marc Sagal, who likes to leverage his vast experience in sports and psychology to create successful corporate teams. Sagal believes his skill as a former professional soccer player and coach helps in his job as Partner at [Winning Mind and EPS](#). [EPS](#) provides consulting services and assessment tools for individuals, companies, and teams to help them perform more effectively under pressure.

About Marc Sagal

Sagal is a graduate of Colorado College and San Diego State University, where he received a master's in sports psychology. He was a professional athlete, and he holds the highest-level coaching license from the United States Soccer Federation. His consulting with Olympic Track and Field athletes will continue at least through the Sydney 2000 games. His training in psychology and his experience as an athlete and coach give him a unique understanding of performance problems facing businesses today.

Sagal has coordinated programs for Lucent Technologies, IMPAC, and General Motors Europe. His book, *Assessment in Sport Psychology*, co-authored with Robert Nideffer, CEO of EPS, includes a model that is also used in business assessment.

TR: Do you use the enhanced performance methodology to work with IT teams?

Sagal: Yes, we do. We work in a variety of different arenas, but recently we've been well received in the IT area, because IT folks are really feeling an incredible amount of pressure. Our specialty is helping folks perform when they're under stress and when things are moving very rapidly.

TR: In order to help them you have to assess them first, is that right?

Sagal: Yes. We usually start with an assessment tool that we've developed called TAIS. It stands for The Attentional and Interpersonal Style inventory, and it was developed about 25 years ago by our CEO. He was working with U.S. Olympic teams, looking at ways to measure concentration and the kinds of critical interpersonal skills that people need to perform when they are under pressure. Although it was developed in the sports world, what we found over the last seven or eight years is that it has great application in business and military environments, particularly those environments where people are operating under high stress and where the results of mistakes are seen more rapidly.

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— Marc Sagal, COO,
Enhanced Performance Systems



TR: How do you use it in sports?

Sagal: When we are working with an athlete or team, we will have them complete the assessment. That enables us to get at what we call the "building blocks of performance." So we can see the pattern of the scores and get a handle on what we believe the critical issues are going to be for that particular athlete. We do that by looking at the profile and comparing what we see as that person's particular strengths and weaknesses, and then evaluating the performance situation. For example, the characteristics of a successful pitcher in baseball may be very different than for a successful catcher. And we want to see if there is a good match between how that individual has scored and what the demands of the performance situation are. So we're looking for a fit.

TR: How do you translate this into business?

Sagal: Well, believe it or not, the same set of skills that are important for an athlete are equally important for someone operating in the business environment. The same theory applies, the same principles apply. What we've done is translated what the effective skill set is from the athletic world to the business world. So we don't really have to measure anything differently. All we have to do is apply what we measure and compare that to a different set of optimal skills.

TR: Can you give an example?

Sagal: A pitcher in baseball needs to be extremely focused, doesn't have to think too much, and basically has to hit a target. You don't necessarily want that person, from a concentration perspective, to be doing a lot of analyzing or big-picture thinking. In a way, there are some IT professionals that are parallel to the pitcher in what they are asked to do. For instance, if they have to write code or just be one member of a team, you want them focused on the end result of a particular product. Their job really isn't to analyze, assess, or see the big picture. So their skill set matches may actually be similar. They will need a similar type of concentration as the pitcher I've described. This is an oversimplification, but [it works as an] example here.

TR: How about IT managers who may be a lot more like coaches?

Sagal: They have to be able to see the big picture. They have to be interpersonally a little bit more sensitive [as] to how to put a good team together, what the big picture is, and where the organization is trying to go. So that type of concentration skill, the ability to analyze and plan, see the big picture, and multitask, would be a skill set that you might find in a coach and also what you might find in a good IT manager.

TR: How about a CIO who wants to put together good teams for several projects? How would they figure out, using your system, which people go on which teams?

Sagal: It's certainly one of the things that we have been asked to do before. The first thing that has to happen is that we have to have a handle on the nature of those projects and what the teams are going to need to be made up of in terms of their different skill sets. We can get a handle on that by talking to the CIO, who [might tell us]:

- Project team A is going to be doing this.
- I have to have someone who is directing that team as a manager.
- I have to have a number of individual contributors who are very focused on very specific aspects of the project.

Perhaps even more detail than that, there may be a function of the team that is more creative in nature. So if we can identify the different components of the team, we can then go in and create what we call a mission profile for each of those different parts of the job.

Interview with Marc Sagal continued

TR: After you identify the needed skill sets, what do you do?

Sagal: We will test the individuals and match what the results of their tests are to what we think are the optimal kinds of characteristics that the members of the team are going to need. We give that information to the CIO, who may [have] to make the decision to put those teams together.

TR: When you say skill sets, are you talking about whether they can program in C++?

Sagal: No, I should clarify that. We're talking much more about the psychological skill sets.

TR: Can you give some examples?

Sagal: We spend a lot of time evaluating a person's ability to concentrate, which we can measure in different ways. One would be the ability to see the big picture, to analyze, put all of the pieces together. Another would be the ability to execute, to be far-sighted, and to see projects from A all the way to Z. Another aspect we call "external awareness," which is the ability to be sensitive to your environment, to be politically savvy, to be able to read a customer, or be sensitive to how other people are reacting to what you're saying.

We're also assessing more familiar interpersonal and psychological characteristics, such as interpersonal style, extroversion, introversion, need for control, self-confidence, and the ability to multitask, which is obviously important in the IT world. We also look at how positive or critical you are, how you give feedback to folks, if you are intellectually expressive, or if you sit on ideas that would have been useful to contribute. That's a short list of the 20 individual characteristics that we're looking at.

Corporate examples

Some of the corporate work that EPS has done includes:

- Putting together teams with varying skill sets
- Implementing team-building exercises and innovation programs
- Identifying employees with professional development needs
- Providing conflict resolution between departments that have differing psychological types
- Helping to decide in a merger who should stay and who should go by identifying high-potential individuals
- Assessing who can work in a high-pressure environment
- Helping a company move from a conservative culture to a dynamic, innovative one
- Identifying who would make good team members for a virtual team, one that is geographically separated

TR: Aren't some of these skills contradictory?

Sagal: Yes. What we've found out through our research is that nobody can do it all. Everybody has strengths and weaknesses in those attentional areas. So if we can find a good match between what's required in the situation and what their psychological skill set is, then we've got somebody who's likely to be effective, because part of our theory is that under pressure you go to your strongest attentional style.

TR: Can a CIO use this test to find the right manager to promote?

Sagal: That's something that we're asked to do all of the time. In fact, that's probably the biggest problem that we see with the high-tech companies. There's a huge demand for IT managers and leaders, and most of the time those people are being promoted because they were successful as an individual contributor. The psychological skill set to be a good leader or manager isn't the same as it is to be a good engineer. So what we can do through our instrument and the interviewing and consulting that we do is identify the kinds of engineers, for instance, who have enough qualities that will allow them to make the transition successfully.

TR: If a CIO was thinking about becoming a CEO or pursuing some sort of change like that, might he or she use this assessment to determine whether or not the skills are there?

Sagal: Yeah, absolutely. That's a great point. The same principle applies, and I think this depends on the role that the CIO is playing in the organization. I think there will be times when a lot of the same qualities will apply for

the CEO as for the CIO. But I think there will also be instances where the CIO is much more focused on technology issues and maybe isn't as focused as the CEO needs to be on much bigger-picture, strategic, company-wide issues. So there may be challenges there, but the kinds of things that we're looking at will be useful to the CIO [who wants to make] that type of transition.

TR: *What is it that makes you come to work everyday? What do you like best about this kind of work?*

Sagal: I think that I am in a position to do a great number of different things. My background is in philosophy, psychology, coaching, and professional sports. I've always needed to have my finger in a number of different pies, and here I'm in charge of an organization with a great product, and I get a chance to grow this company, manage the resources, and also have a hand in the actual consulting and coaching responsibilities. I get to do a lot of very interesting things, and I work with a lot of companies that are on the cutting edge of what they do, so there's a learning component to my job that keeps me excited.

We'd like to hear from you

Tell us what you think about this type of leadership assessment tool. Post a comment to the article below, or send us an [e-mail](#).