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EGO ENHANCEMENT AND EGO DEPLETION

Victorious Roman generals returning through the streets of Rome to ecstatic crowds would have a slave whispering in their ear "You are human" to remind them that they were not gods.

The opposite to the positive roar of the crowd is the booing of the crowd – the feeling that people don't want you to win. (The London Olympics crowd reserved booing for the politicians).

Psychologist Roy Baumeister would have described this as a form of ego depletion, and it is experienced as a tendency to quit more easily when you're not feeling supported. He showed that all variants of voluntary effort draw at least partly on a shared pool of mental energy. Thus subjects instructed to stifle their emotional reactions to an emotionally charged film will later perform worse on a test of physical stamina. They will also give up earlier than normal when faced with a difficult cognitive task. And the implication is that they will also perform less well at physical tasks such as athletics, swimming and cycling if they are having to suppress feelings of ego depletion brought on by a negative crowd.

HOME TEAM ADVANTAGE

Those British and other Olympians who experienced the roar of the crowd this summer, urging them on to victory, have almost all referred to the boost this gave them. It has been well-documented how much better national teams do in the Olympics when the games are held on home soil – though much of that is due to the long-term investment in the sport rather than the impact of the crowd.

There are lots of parallels drawn between sports teams and teams at work, but with home team advantage the sports analogy rather breaks down. Yes, home teams in the major sports leagues in the US win 54 – 69% of the time, but it turns out that a lot of that is due to the home crowd influencing (intimidating?) the officials. How much of it is due to the feel good, boost factor of hearing and seeing all those supporters around you is difficult to pin down.

This is where we make a bit of a leap to the world of work. Teams at work do not

generally have a crowd cheering them on. But they do have peers and/or a leader who are capable of making their support (or otherwise) known. And my supposition is that high performing teams are those where each team member is really (yes really, really) wanting all other team members to be successful – not just the team as a whole, but as individuals.

If we are honest with ourselves, it's not very often that we have wanted our peers (also read: rivals for the next promotion) to be super successful is it? Success for the team is one thing, but success for a rival, particularly if that makes him look better than me, is different. Well, let's drop back into a sporting (football) metaphor. If it's two on one in front of goal, and you have the ball but your team mate is in a better position to score, you should pass it to him. The team wins, his goal average goes up, and you get the consolation "assist" – and some ego enhancement.

