



## Getting the team from good to great

*Former England rugby star and record try-scorer Rory Underwood talks to Edwin Smith about how to motivate high-performance teams*

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here are loads of successful teams out there that aren't high-performance teams, says Rory Underwood, "but the question is, how do you get from good to great?"

That's what we're here to discuss, and having enjoyed two hugely successful (and largely simultaneous) careers on the wing – one for the England rugby union team and the other as a jet pilot for the RAF – it's something that Underwood is eminently qualified to talk about.

On an unseasonably brilliant day he's come to London from his Lincolnshire home (and office) to meet clients of his aptly named consultancy, Wingman. But it soon becomes clear that he goes about things in a different way from the multi-national institutions that dominate this sector.

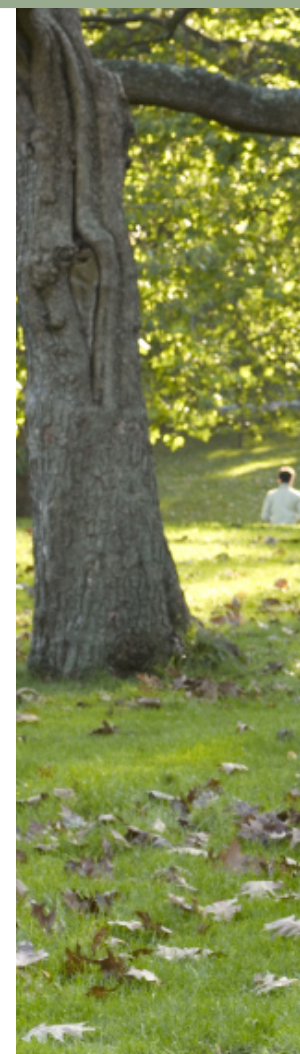
It's not hard data or complex IT systems that concern Underwood. Instead, it's the team dynamic, the manner in which

people communicate and the capacity for empathy among colleagues, that form the locus of his approach. "It's all about how you – as a management team – act, and behave, and communicate," he says. "You have to understand it's about the soft stuff – *how* you do stuff as well as *what* you do."

Simple enough, you might think, but, according to Underwood, it's not something that many organisations think about deeply or often. "I ask my clients, 'When was the last time you talked about yourselves as a team?' In 10 years I could count the number of times that I've had a definitive answer on one hand."

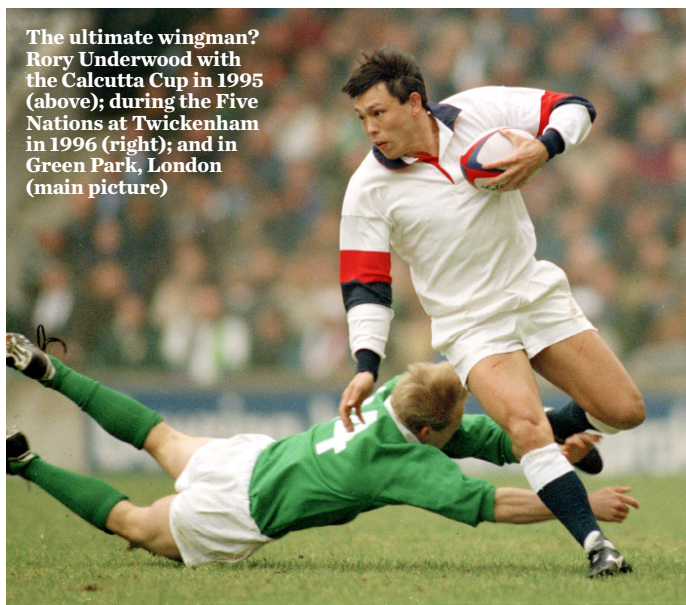
How come? "They're too busy – they're fire-fighting," he says. As a result, time is seldom set aside to look at things from a different angle. "You can have the world's best business plan but if you don't work together as a team, you won't achieve. In many businesses you live and die by the result of your team, not how you perform *with the team* – that's wrong."

The next question, then, is how do you



Picture: Suki Dhanda

**The ultimate wingman?**  
Rory Underwood with the Calcutta Cup in 1995 (above); during the Five Nations at Twickenham in 1996 (right); and in Green Park, London (main picture)



### THE WINGMAN APPROACH

Successful management comes down to how leadership teams "act, and behave and communicate".



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go about getting a team of people with different backgrounds, motivations, strengths and weaknesses to work together as well as they possibly can?

“Most people know what the stumbling blocks are,” says Underwood, “but they don't know how to resolve them. What we do is provide the right environment to discuss these things – an environment where people feel that they can talk as openly and freely as they need to.”

Another part of the process often incorporates a visit to one of Underwood's old stomping grounds and a chance to observe a working RAF base in full flow.

“When I take people to an air force station, they come away saying, ‘Wow! Very impressive, very professional, very articulate.’ People talk about it as being ‘high-performance’. When I ask them why

they think that, they talk about the fact that the people exude this professional attitude and communicate well. There's nothing about KPIs or targets or results. It's all about the way people behave.”

Even with Underwood turned out in a navy business suit, crisp white shirt and striped tie, it's impossible to put his 85-cap, 49-try international rugby career to the back of your mind. At 5ft 8ins he's not a big man, but even at the age of 47 – he hung up his boots before the gym-mad, professional player became the norm – there is a stocky athleticism about his frame that recalls his part in one of the most successful England sides in history.

Asked which of the teams he's been involved with is most deserving of the ‘high-performance’ label, he's in little doubt. It's the England team that rose out

## Championing community rugby

While proudly supporting the RBS 6 Nations tournament – which kicked off on Friday 4 February – the Bank is very much focused on the grass-roots of the game through RBS RugbyForce. A nationwide community volunteer programme, RBS RugbyForce helps local rugby clubs to improve their facilities. Registered clubs are provided with online guidance and tools to help them co-ordinate a community-wide effort to give the club a make-over. The RBS RugbyForce Weekend takes place throughout Scotland, England, Ireland and Wales on 11-12 June 2011. “I think it's fantastic,” says Rory Underwood. “It's the sort of thing that can make a huge difference. The more you do to make it easier for parents and get kids to come along and play, the better.” For more information or to register your club, visit [rbs.co.uk/rugbyforce](http://rbs.co.uk/rugbyforce).



of the mire of under-achievement in the 1980s to reach the World Cup Final in 1991 and claim Grand Slams in the Five Nations in 1991, 1992 and 1995. So, what was the key factor in this success?

“That's very easy,” he says. “That was Geoff Cooke, the coach. He provided the team with direction. He was very bold in picking Will Carling as a very young captain [at the age of 22].”

While Underwood doesn't seek to overplay the similarities of sport and business, he is unequivocal about one key crossover. “There's a real onus on the leader to try to bring team members together,” he says, “and to articulate very clearly what the vision is, and how they're going to go about achieving it. It's about creating the right environment, where people can become a team.” ■