

Propelled to Holistic Success

In today's fast-paced, challenging business world, executives need to sustain high performance. But they also need to achieve a 'work/life' integration and to remain healthy. Dr Christian Marcolli's P⁶PROP program helps them take a holistic view

When FC Basel created a footballing sensation in December 2011, beating Manchester United to progress to the knockout stages of Europe's premier competition, the UEFA Champions League, Dr. Christian Marcolli could take quiet satisfaction. Whilst the media raved about the breathtaking performance of Basel's players, the skilful tactics of their manager, and even the impact of their supporters, Marcolli's influence went largely unnoticed. But, behind the scenes, the Swiss performance coach had made his mark.

By Tom Nash

That season FC Basel went on to record a home win against another Goliath, current European champions Bayern Munich, and also won a hat-trick of domestic competitions. Football pundits rate the team among the best that Switzerland has ever produced and, gradually, Marcolli has gained credit for his contribution to its success, through his work as a sports psychologist with both individual players and the team as a whole.



A former professional footballer himself, Marcolli's work as a performance coach has spread far beyond 'the beautiful game', both to other sports – notably tennis, where he has helped Roger Federer, among other top players – and also to business. He is the founder and owner of Marcolli Executive Excellence, a management consulting firm specializing in leadership development, team effectiveness and organizational health. Since 1997, he has worked with executives, corporate leaders and leadership teams around the world, helping them to achieve sustainable high performance, often in challenging conditions.

While these days Marcolli routinely rubs shoulders with sporting icons and consults with big-name brands, he cut his coaching teeth in much harsher surroundings. After his football career, he spent six years holding sports lessons in Swiss jails – an extremely demanding socio-psychological environment. He studied hard too, acquiring a PhD in Applied Psychology from the University of Zurich, completing training in Sport Psychology in 1996 at the University of Ottawa, and achieving certification as a mental training consultant in 2000.

More recently, Marcolli's passion for understanding and achieving optimal performance has evolved into P⁶PROP, a holistic leadership performance model. PROP stands for Personal Resource Optimizing Performance. The six 'P's refer to what Marcolli believes are an individual's critical success factors, namely, passion, precision, perception, peace,



presence and persistence. The essential concept behind P6 PROP is that to display these characteristics and achieve sustainable top performance, executives must look after themselves physically as well as mentally and emotionally, and they need to build up and protect significant relationships. Issues such as exercise, diet and strategic work/life integration are to the fore.

As such, it is hardly an original concept, and Marcolli makes no such claim. It is, after all, the sort of common sense approach instilled in most of us early in life, at home or at school. But the idea now has substantive scientific research behind it and Marcolli has given it the kind of structure needed for it to become more widely embraced by businesses.

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Marcolli takes up the story. “This is the one program we do specifically for business leaders and three-quarters of our clients for P⁶PROP are from the corporate world,” he says. “It became clear to me from my experience with top sports people that the six ‘P’s are key and this has had real resonance with businesses. I had coached a lot previously, but 2010 was the first time I’d done it this way.”

Marcolli explains the P⁶PROP model in terms of the six blades of an aeroplane propeller. Each of the blades corresponds to a P-component from P6 – passion, precision, and so on. The way the blades of each propeller are angled determines whether a P-component has a positive, neutral or negative impact on performance. Each blade, when angled optimally, provides thrust and boosts performance. On the other hand, if a blade is poorly adjusted it will fail to add forward momentum, and may even become a brake on performance.

To profoundly assess the executive’s current standard of personal leadership, Marcolli and his team developed a comprehensive and progressive diagnostic package consisting of new tools such as the P⁶PROP Inventory, the Passion Storyboarding and the Life Management Survey. In addition, the program includes a state-of-the-art health and fitness test. The methodology is scientifically rigorous – for example, analyzing body composition (BMI, body fat), energy levels, sleep patterns and time management – so identifying the P-components that are boosting performance, as well as those that are acting as a drag on it. The model can then be used as the basis for a development program and to monitor ongoing progress, providing long-term personal direction.

Marcolli continues, “I tell clients that this isn’t a short-term fix. This is about making sure they’re here for the long term. It’s about keeping them fit and firing, avoiding things like burn-out and divorce.”

Over the last three years, he has run half-a-dozen courses, generally consisting of 8-15 executives from one company, most of them senior decision-makers or ‘high potentials’, which are his target groups for the program. The size of the group is important, he says. “We want to deal with people as individuals and offer them coaching, not just have them sitting anonymously in a class of 40 people.” Equally, too small a group may fail “to achieve a sharing dynamic in the program”. In other words, participants may not want to admit to weaknesses or express their true feelings.

Marcolli admits that it can be “hard to bring people back” if they’re already highly stressed, perhaps relying on day-to-day firefighting to get through, and carrying the ‘battle scars’ of career progression, such as unhealthy lifestyles and broken relationships. “Some of the older, more senior people say ‘this is the price you pay for success’, but it doesn’t have to be. If possible, we want to get high potentials early.”

The research shows that, since participating in the program, the executives have significantly more energy, are much more engaged at home, and know better what routines allow them to completely recover in stressful periods

Fit for business

Senior executives from Novartis, the Swiss multinational pharmaceutical company, have benefited from the P⁶PROP program

Jerh Collins has recently been appointed head of global chemical operations for Novartis. He is in no doubt that his attendance on the inaugural P⁶PROP program in September 2010 has played a role in this career journey.

Collins was among a group of nine executives selected for the program. He had little prior knowledge, other than that it was some kind of “leadership catalyst course” and it would last three days. But he believes it has fundamentally enhanced both his career and also his personal life. “I would say the credit for this was half to Christian [Marcolli] and half to Novartis for the way they approached it,” he says.

Collins was impressed by his company’s commitment, including the attendance of Novartis’s head of technical operations – a very senior position in the firm. There was also an inspirational half-day with Bertrand Piccard, the balloonist famous for being the first, ahead of Sir Richard Branson, to achieve a non-stop balloon flight around the globe.

“I thought ‘Wow! This is not just toasting marshmallows around the campfire’. They really want to take us to the next level,” says Collins. “I felt a responsibility to make the most of it and to make sure I brought the benefits back to the business.”

At the time, Collins had also recently been promoted, from head of chemical operations in the UK, where he had been responsible for around 500 people, to the same position in Switzerland, where he had almost three times as many staff. “It was a big step up and I had to raise my game,” he says. “I love challenges and I’m very competitive, but this can be quite destructive if not channelled in the right way. The program taught me rituals to be more reflective, to take stock methodically and see the bigger picture, not just charge ahead at 100mph expecting everyone else to do the same.”

A one-on-one with Piccard also made key lessons vivid to Collins, such as: “Not to fight against the wind, but to slow down and work with the elements; and in crisis there can often be opportunity”.

Collins says P⁶PROP has given him “an improved ability to cope in an ever-changing environment, with high workload, diverse people and myriad challenges, in a considered way. I’m a lot calmer and more focused now when things are tough – I wasn’t born with this skill. And I’m happier and more engaged at home.”

Collins subsequently sought Novartis’s permission to engage Marcolli to work regularly with his own team. It was a major investment, involving two days of coaching for 15 executives every six months, over three years – but it has paid off. “It’s now a fantastic team, capable, empowered, able to challenge and be challenged,” he says. “We’ve been on a huge journey.”

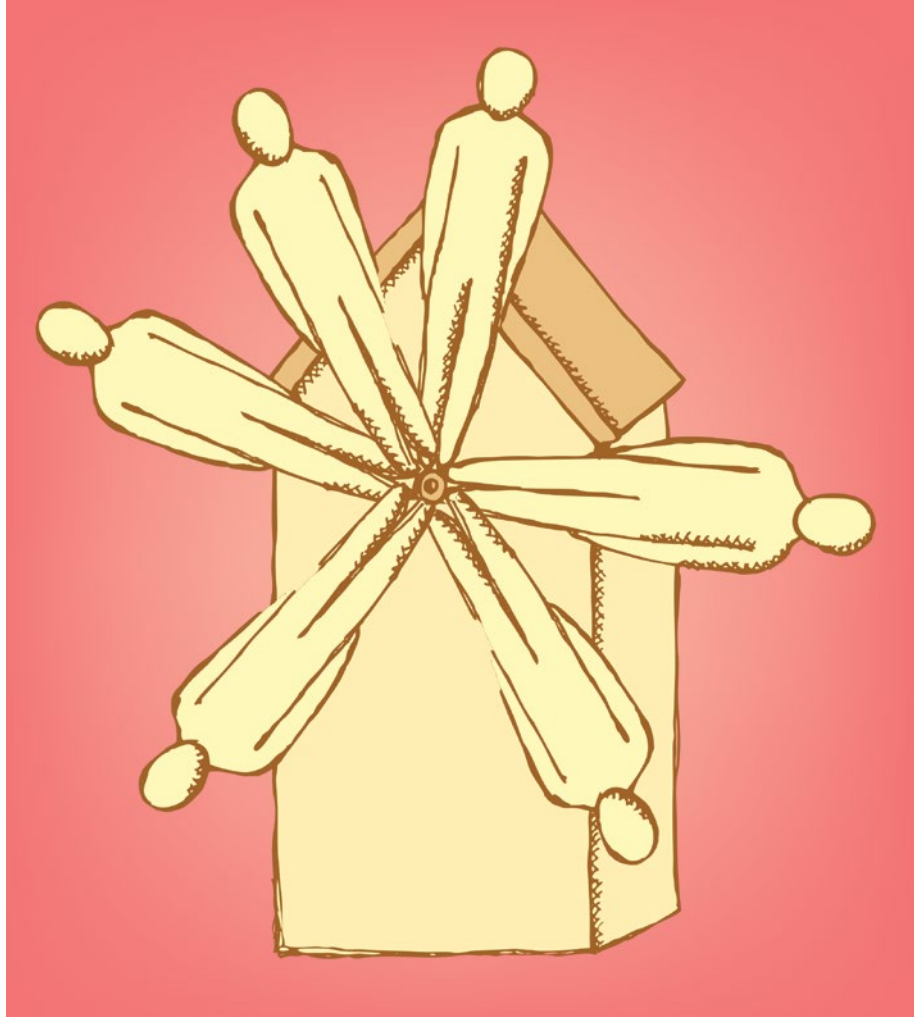
Andrea Saxer is head of HR for Novartis International and has been working with Dr Christian Marcolli for over 10 years. When she heard about P⁶PROP she was immediately struck by its holistic approach.

“It’s not just about the usual performance measures, but looks at people ‘in the round’, including facets that are really important for long-term success, such as health and family life,” says Saxer. “This approach is not very well established in business generally – and, to be honest, it wasn’t at Novartis, which is traditionally a very performance-oriented company.”

She says things are gradually changing. “It has been absolutely a ‘win/win’ for me, my team and my company. For me personally, I have chosen routines to follow for nutrition and exercise, for example. There is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. You feel addressed on an individual level and choose the most beneficial things, and those that are easiest for you to integrate.”

Saxer’s 35-strong team attended the program in October 2012 and, as a manager, she continues to observe its impact on them. “People are interested because it’s to do with them and their own lives. They are still talking about it and keeping to their routines and they are motivating each other. It has been a great experience as a team, even though it was not planned as a team-building exercise – which has been a great side-effect.”

Saxer has since selected the program as part of a mentoring program with one of the most senior executives in the company that represent her most important ‘client group’. This too has been a success, not least in opening up the possibility of a wider change of culture in the company. “It’s a big step forward,” she says.



The all-important question is does the program work? There are numerous participants willing to testify that it does (see box: Fit for business), but as with many executive development programs, it can be difficult to provide statistical proof. But in this respect, Marcolli has achieved more than most, recently publishing comprehensive data on participant outcomes.

The research evaluates the mid to long-term effects of P⁶PROP on all six groups that have so far undertaken the program. The effects are therefore measured over periods ranging from six months (for those who completed the program most recently) to 32 months (the first cohort in 2010). Around 60% of participants provided feedback, of whom 40% were women and two-thirds were aged between 39-46.

The research shows that, since participating in the program, the executives have significantly more energy, are much more engaged at home, and know better what routines allow them to completely recover in stressful periods. Between 65% and 82% of respondents have initiated at least one 'good habit' since the program, and are still practising it, in each of a range of areas including exercise, nutrition, sleep, work/life balance and "being more present" at home and at work. (Good habits include things like getting 7-8 hours of sleep per night, doing cardio-aerobic training 2-3 hours per week and taking 'deliberate actions' with your most significant people at home and at work).

Impressively, 80% rate the program as having made "a significant contribution to their ability to sustain high performance"; 84% say it has made "a significant contribution to their personal health, fitness and wellbeing"; and 82% believe it has helped them to "harmonize their professional life with their private life".

A quarter of participants have been promoted to a higher management level since the program and every one of them believed the program to have made a significant contribution to their ability to sustain high performance.

Despite much discussion about the need for leadership development in corporate and public organizations, and the considerable industry that surrounds it, this is the first authoritative periodical focused entirely on this area.

Developing Leaders looks at the critical confluence between the provision of executive education and the real everyday needs of organizations to strengthen their management teams, their corporate performance, and their leadership.

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