

# Six Of The Best

*A hand-picked selection of articles by Stuart Cross  
from the last six months*

July 2010



**MORGAN CROSS  
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***Because Great Results  
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# About Six Of The Best

This booklet includes six of my articles from the last six months. They are selected from my free, monthly e-newsletter, Great Results, my blog, Cross Wires and my weekly article for the Sterling Performance blog at BNET.co.uk.

Each article is designed to provide a mix of provocative ideas and practical tools to help you improve performance – for you, for your team and for your business.

*Thanks for reading.*

*Stuart Cross*



## The Six Articles

- 1. England o World Cup Lessons 5**
- 2. Are You Reactive Or Proactive?**
- 3. The Power of the Written Word**
- 4. Leading Successful Strategy Off-Sites**
- 5. How To Coach Yourself**
- 6. So, You Think You're World Class?**

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# 1. England o World Cup Lessons 5

*First published on BNET, June 29 2010*

The inquests had started before the referee blew the final whistle. England's failure at this year's World Cup, culminating in their heaviest ever World Cup defeat to Germany, led to one question across TV studios, newspaper reports, pubs and homes: what went wrong?

Many fans look for a single answer (a lack of passion, poor skills, the wrong manager) but life, and even football, is more complex than that. I have identified five drivers of World Cup success and these factors apply to business organisations as much as they do to groups of over-paid, over-hyped footballers!

So how well does your team, department or business score on the following five factors? And, if you don't want to improve your business, look away now!

**1. Leadership.** Leadership creates the conditions for a group to pursue a common set of objectives. Although we look for a single, heroic figure to provide all the answers, life is usually more complex and less romantic.



Although it starts at the top, all organisations need leadership throughout the group if they are to achieve their objectives. Something has happened to the England team where this multi-level leadership has failed under pressure.

**2. Organisation.** Within any group individuals need to understand how things will get done, what is expected of them in that process, and what level of control and decision-making they have. Given the fact that England's defenders were constantly out of position against Germany on Sunday, and that few other teams are following a rigid 4-4-2 system, England's organisation was clearly ineffective.

**3. Ability.** The level of technical skills and capabilities to achieve the group's objectives is just one factor in driving success. It is not enough for one person, or even a few, to have high skill levels (great players such as George Best of Northern Ireland and Ryan Giggs of Wales never reached a World Cup tournament, for example), relevant skills need to be spread across the group. England's reliance on Wayne Rooney and Steven Gerrard was clearly insufficient when these players failed to perform to their full capability and the team faced a German (or Algerian) side of less famous but more mobile and technically superior players.

**4. Team Spirit.** OK, so England weren't as bad as the French, but there seems to have been an undercurrent of differences within the group and a lack of group cohesion. John Terry and David James, for example, nearly said things to the press but held back, and individual players did not share concerns at the team's meetings.

**5. Fearlessness.** Thankfully, England didn't need to take penalties at this World Cup, but Robert Green's howler against the USA embodied the fear and nervousness that pervaded the group. Compared to England's qualifying campaign, when the team's performances were generally positive and confident, the team looked fearful and more concerned with not losing rather than winning.

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*“Although it starts at the top, all organisations need leadership throughout the group if they are to achieve their objectives.”*

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## 2. Are You Reactive Or Proactive?

*First published on the Cross Wires Blog, 15 January 2010*

**Which of these approaches best describe how you work?**

<i>Reactive</i>	Proactive
<i>Survive</i>	Thrive
<i>Follower</i>	Leader
<i>Urgent</i>	Important
<i>Traveling without a map</i>	A clear direction
<i>What next!?!</i>	What if?
<i>Limited choice</i>	Endless possibilities
<i>Rushed decisions</i>	Rapid learning
<i>Overwhelmed</i>	Focused action
<i>Them</i>	Us
<i>Dealing with the past</i>	Focused on the future
<i>Risk avoidance</i>	Prudent risk-taking
<i>Problem solving</i>	Raising the bar
<i>"To Do" lists</i>	...and "To Don't" lists

### 3. Getting Your Ideas Heard & Approved

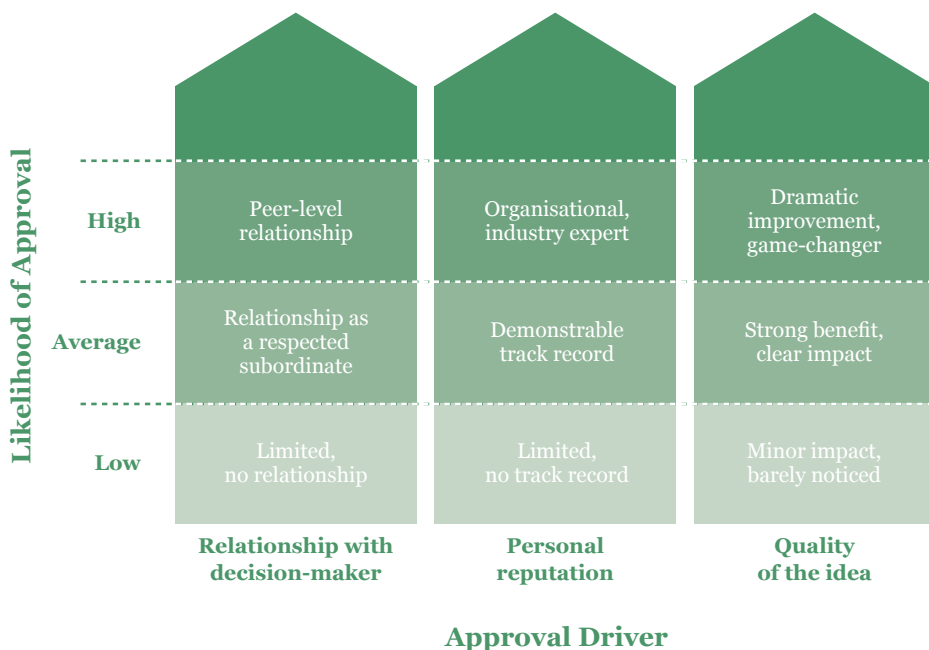
*First published on the Cross Wires Blog, 8 April and 21 April 2010*

Most business decisions are a mix of the rational and emotional and the personal and the organisational.

Your ability to get a proposal heard and approved depends on three clear variables: your own personal credibility; your relationship with the decision maker; and the quality of the idea

In short, it's not just about the idea itself. It's also about you and your relationship with the person who has the power to say yes or no.

Using the chart, and for each of your business proposals, simply determine your current position on each of the three dimensions. What do the results tell you about your chances, and which of the three drivers do you need to do some work on?



## 4. Leading Successful Strategy Off-Sites

*First published in the Great Results e-Newsletter, March 2010*

How do you feel when you are invited to a one or two-day strategy off-site? Are you excited by the anticipation of getting involved in resolving critical issues, or do you immediately check your calendar to find the perfect excuse not to attend?

Most leaders, whether they run a team, a department or the entire business, look to have at least one or two sessions a year where they can take a selected group away from the daily pressures of business, develop their strategy and identify priorities for performance improvement.

In the course of my work I facilitate and get involved in many such off-site sessions. From that experience - both positive and negative! - here are my seven lessons for success.

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*“Too many off-site meetings suffer from fuzzy objectives.”*

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**1. Clarify your objectives well in advance.** Too many off-site meetings suffer from fuzzy objectives, resulting in topics being introduced at the last minute, discussions based on immediate gut feel rather than facts, and time spent on issues that are tangential to the future performance of the group. One or two specific objectives should be set 6-10 weeks ahead of the meeting to allow relevant information to be gathered and the session planned effectively.

**2. Match participants to the objectives.** Getting as many senior people as possible in the room is not necessarily the best way to achieve your objectives. The temptation is to invite too many people, but ask yourself what are you trying to achieve? If you are after new ideas and thinking a diverse and larger group is appropriate, but if you are after making some critical decisions fewer people in the room is generally best. Alternatively, a session that is focused on implementing solutions benefits from the involvement of front-line operational leaders.



### 3. Share the data before the meeting.

Nothing kills an off-site session quite like a series of powerpoint presentations. You can visibly see the life-force leaving the bodies of the participants as the presenter drones on like this: *“Obviously you can’t quite read this on the screen as the font’s too small, but it shows that 17% of the 32% who said they were interested in the product, account for 23% of the 6% growth in this sector of the market”*. Instead, share relevant data ahead of the off-site, both through short, pithy(!) papers and through individual or small-group briefing sessions. You can then focus the off-site agenda on the real work that’s required.

### 4. The route to success is involvement.

The off-site’s #1 driver of success is meaningful involvement. If, as leader, you offer your opinions too early it can kill the meeting’s energy and momentum. Instead, you should find ways to get participants actively involved in the meeting, rather than becoming passive observers of the session. That’s why the use of an external facilitator can be important, and why including smaller, break-out discussions (where everyone can have the chance to contribute), scoring and voting mechanisms, and workshop-style processes that structure the debate are so useful.

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*The off-site’s #1 driver of success is meaningful involvement.”*

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**5. Content trumps process.** More people are turned on by discussions and dialogue on the content of the organisation’s business (e.g. what businesses should we be in over the next 5 years?) than they are by process debates (e.g. what are the pro-formas we need to fill out to complete the pack for the group plan?). Make sure that your time is at least 80% content-focused to maintain involvement, engagement and energy.

**6. Remember, you don’t need to solve everything.** Last week, I facilitated an off-site session where the group agreed 3 immediate growth priorities but were unable to agree on which others, from a list of 15 or more options, should be taken forward. In my view, agreeing the initial three priorities was a success, and we were quickly agreed that a small sub-group would follow-up on the meeting to review the remaining priorities and make further recommendations.

**7. Follow-up.** In successful off-sites, the energy that comes from participants engaging in meaningful discussion on their most important issues means that action planning becomes a natural next-step to move things forward, rather than a painful necessity where everyone hopes the finger won’t be pointed at them.

## 5. How To Coach Yourself

*First published on BNET, 8 June 2010*

There is a lot of mystique surrounding coaching, but it is a relatively simple, common sense process. For the past 12 months or so I have added coaching services to my business, helping successful executives become even more effective.

Although a coach can be highly beneficial to unleashing an individual's full potential, it is perfectly possible to follow a self-help route. The key to successful outcomes is dependent on two aspects:

*1. Improving your self-awareness.* You cannot change until you are clearly aware of your existing level of performance, and the impact you have on others.

*2. Taking responsibility for improvement.* A mix of self-motivation and disciplined follow-through is required to make the behavioural changes necessary to improve your performance.



Here are 8 steps below for you to take to coach yourself and improve your own performance.

### **1. Clarify your top 3 priorities.**

Using your own experience, formal feedback mechanisms, and more informal feedback from colleagues, identify areas that you can drive forward to help you achieve your wider goals? Don't automatically focus on your perceived weaknesses. Take time to assess what will have the greatest impact. You may end up with a long list, but just pick two or three areas where you can focus and make big progress.

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***“Just pick two or three areas where you can focus and make big progress.”***

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**2. Turn your priorities into specific, achievable objectives.**

“Learning the piano” may be one of your major ambitions, but to move forward you need to turn this goal into more pragmatic objectives. A goal of having 10 piano lessons in the next 3 months makes this goal real and helps you take action.

**3. Set up a 60 or 90-day plan to deliver your goals.** You can get a lot done in 2 or 3 months if you maintain focus and commitment. Break down each objective into weekly milestones and commit to them.

**4. Make delivery of these plans non-negotiable.** Make sure that these milestones are your top priorities. Fit other activities around them, not vice versa.

**5. Find an accountability partner.**

Being accountable to a third party keeps your feet to the fire, and helps you to keep your promises. Your partner shouldn't be a friend, or a shoulder to cry on, but someone whom you trust and who is willing to give you honest, objective feedback.

**6. Monitor your performance.**

Ruthlessly track progress against your milestones and assess how this is impacting on your effectiveness. Compare your own views with feedback from others you trust. As you become more aware of your performance you will rapidly improve it.

**7. Reward yourself.** As you achieve your goals and plans (and even as you complete difficult tasks) take the time to reward yourself. This need not involve a huge financial outlay, but could involve leaving early from work one day to spend more time with your family, or simply enjoying a nice lunch.

**8. Rinse and repeat.** Once you've achieved success repeat the process and, over time, you will transform your personal effectiveness.

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*“You can get a lot done in 2 or 3 months if you maintain focus and commitment.”*

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## 6. So, You Think You're World Class?

*First published in the Great Results e-Newsletter, June 2010*

It is common that, when I'm discussing a company's future strategy, someone will say that they want to be world class. Their premise is that world class companies thrive and prosper in any economy, grow relentlessly and deliver returns to shareholders way ahead of their competition.

And who wouldn't want a bit of that action? But the term 'world class' has become little more than empty rhetoric. When I ask these executives what they mean by 'world class' I get inconsistent and sometimes incoherent responses. It is rare for me to see a strategic agenda that is consistent with an organisation seeking to achieve world class status.

Of course, it's not a requirement for businesses to become world class. After all, you can still get views from half-way up a mountain that are nearly as good as those from the top (although you only see the mountains immediately in front of you if you stay in the valley).

The point is that if you say you are world class, or if you have ambitions in that direction, you should mean it. Only then will your people demonstrate the commitment, endeavour and creativity to help the organisation achieve that aim.



So let me give you 10 criteria to help you judge whether your organisation is 'world class'.

Score yourself from 0-5 for each of the following criteria, where: 0 = Strongly disagree; 1 = Disagree; 2 = Slightly disagree; 3 = Slightly agree; 4 = Agree; and 5 = Strongly agree.

**1. Global Presence.** We don't just seek to be great in our own back yard, but bring our unique value to customers across the globe. We are present in all the world's leading economies.

**2. Brand Affection.** Our brand and its values is known to 100% of our target customers in our domestic market, and over 70% of users in the world's top 20 markets. Wherever we go our brand is trusted, respected and generates warm affection.

**3. Customer Magnetism.** We don't just attract and keep customers but create fierce loyalty that keeps our customers coming back to us time and time again.

**4. Shape Perceptions.** We are a beacon and driving force for new ideas and innovations that drive and define both our own and other markets. Other organisations follow in the slipstream that we create.

**5. A Force For Good.** Our impact on society is broader than the narrow business activities we undertake. We make a genuine, tangible and hugely positive impact on the world.

**6. Excellence Everywhere.** Our organisation sets the highest standards in performance, integrity and behaviour. Yes, we understand the big picture, but we are also fanatical about getting the details right, every time.

**7. Organisational Passion.** There is a tangible buzz across our organisation, where people delight in achieving our goals and improving the lives of others.

**8. Talent Leadership.** Our organisation is full of people who are passionate about what they do and our colleagues and leaders have genuinely superior skills and capabilities to our competitors. New colleagues seek us out ahead of other organisations.

**9. Focused Perseverance.** We are selective in where we choose to direct our efforts, but tenacious in delivering success. We remain fixed on our goals and objectives, resilient in the face of setbacks and flexible in finding the best route to get there.

**10. Superior Financials.** Our growth and returns are dramatically ahead of other players in our markets. We may not always lead in any one year but look back over, say, 10 years and our track record speaks for itself, as do our plans and strategies for the future.

**So how does your organisation measure up? Compare your total score to these ratings.**

**Over 45 – World Class:**

*Congratulations, you are part of a genuinely world class company, at least for now. But what steps are you taking to ensure you stay there and don't take a Toyota or BP-style fall?*

**30-45 – Middle Class:** *You are certainly a more effective organisation than most, and show leadership on some dimensions. What are your priorities to improve your position over the next 3-5 years?*

**Less than 30 – Remedial Class:** *If you have any real 'world class' ambitions you need to do far more than incremental improvements – you must dramatically raise the bar. It could take many years to improve, so identify initial game-changing priorities.*





## About Stuart Cross

Stuart Cross is a consultant, coach and speaker who helps world-class companies dramatically accelerate profit growth. Since its launch in 2006 his firm, Morgan Cross Consulting, has attracted clients including Avon Cosmetics, Alliance Boots, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Groupe Aeroplan.

Prior to founding Morgan Cross, Stuart was Head of Strategy for Boots the Chemists, the UK's largest health and beauty retailer, is a chartered accountant (though he rarely divulges this information on a 'first date') and has an MBA from Warwick Business School.

In addition to his consulting, coaching and speaking work Stuart teaches on MBA courses at both Warwick and Nottingham University Business Schools. He is also a regular writer on business and management issues, and has a weekly article with the business website BNET.co.uk

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## What People Say About Stuart Cross

*“Stuart writes clearly, intelligently and succinctly.  
I find his lessons both provocative and practical.”*

**David Stead, Chief Financial Officer, Dunelm Group plc**

*“If you really want to get some breakthrough thinking into  
your business then Stuart’s the guy to contact.”*

**Simon McCandlish, Director of Pharmacy and Healthcare,  
Boots the Chemists**

*“Not only is Stuart a fantastic consultant in the UK,  
he’s one of the best in the world.”*

**Alan Weiss, author of Million Dollar Consulting**

*“Stuart used his excellent strategic skills to help us create  
a new agenda that will drive significantly higher levels of  
growth for the business.”*

**Stephen Ford, Vice President Strategy, Avon Cosmetics Europe**

*“Stuart has that rare combination: real intelligence, deep  
experience and a light touch in bringing concepts to life.”*

**Jayne Mayled, Managing Director, Jupiter Design Limited**

*“I would recommend Stuart to any company looking for  
creative solutions to challenging strategic issues.”*

**Rick Mills, Director of Corporate Development, Alliance Boots**