FAQ MARKETING LOGIC

ARCHIVE AUDIO INTERVIEW

Simon Hartley

Guest Interview Transcript



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Simon Hartley

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Simon Hartley Interview

Editor:

Today's guest is Simon Hartley, a performance coach and sports psychology consultant who spent nearly 30 years working with elite athletes, teams, and organisations around the world. He's the founder of Be World Class and co-founder of Success Engineers, and has helped everyone from Premier League footballers to Olympic gold medalists unlock their potential. Simon is also a bestselling author and keynote speaker known for turning big ideas about performance into simple practical steps that anyone can use to raise their game. Simon, thank you so much for joining us.

Simon Hartley:

Thank you. Very, very happy to be here.

Editor:

Well, maybe we could start by asking you to share how you transitioned from sports science into performance coaching at a global level.

Simon Hartley:

Yeah. I studied sports science when I was at college and at university. And whilst I was studying, I was also working in elite sport. I was very, very fortunate that, at the start of my second year undergraduate, I was working with elite rugby league players, England cricketers, and that gave me a platform to go and work in elite sport as I left university. And very quickly... I mean, sports science is quite a wide discipline. It includes physiology and biomechanics and psychology, all sorts of things. At university, I knew that I'd become very, very interested in the psychology of sport and performance. So I narrowed my studies down into that. And as I started becoming a practitioner, I also became more of a practitioner in psychology than any of the other disciplines within sports science. And that really sort of set my path. One of the bizarre things... I'm going to call it bizarre because it probably should have occurred to me a lot sooner.

Simon Hartley:

I always described that I worked in sports psychology, but the truth is I worked in human psychology. And it took me quite a long time to realise that

sports psychology is a misnomer, and what I was doing helped anybody. We were talking about how to get the best out of our minds really. And it doesn't matter whether you're an Olympic athlete, a salesperson, a doctor, a consultant, whatever you are, the same stuff works for everybody. So then, I realised it was really performance psychology and that what I was doing was coaching performance psychology. It's what goes on between our ears, and making sure that the stuff that goes on between our ears helps us rather than hinders us. And if we can start to engineer our mental game, as I call it, we could actually start to achieve much more.

Editor:
Well, during the introduction, I said you are a founder of Be World Class. For our audience, anyone who's listening or reading this, maybe you could tell us what does Be World Class mean in practise

Simon Hartley:
Yeah. As well as working in elite sport and in the field of performance psychology, I've always been really curious to understand how the very best in the world operate. So I set myself a little mission. And after working in the Olympic programmes for a few years and working in elite sport, I wanted to know whether, "If I studied the best in the world outside of sport, would I find the same characteristics at work? Are they driven by the same stuff? Have they got the same going on between their ears as the athletes have?" So I studied some individual world-class performers, including people like a Michelin Star chef, head of a world-leading science and medical research institute, a World Barista champion, mountaineer, polar explorer, all sorts of people. And actually, I found, yes, there were some common characteristics that drove all of these world-class people.

Simon Hartley:
And it was part of my curiosity to understand not just how the best in the world operate, but also what can we learn from them and, "Is there a way I can distil that down and help other people adopt those principles?" So really Be World Class is a combination of my studies, my work with world-class performers, but also my passion to turn that into meaningful insights that

people can actually use, principles that they can adopt, so that they can drive their own performance and become great too.

Editor:

Could you give us maybe a quick insight? What would be maybe the key thing that you think that we should all do to Be World Class? Could you share something with us?

Simon Hartley:

Yeah. I think there's a foundation, and I used to describe it by saying that world-class performers were fueled by passion. It's partly true, it's a version of passion. It's curiosity. If I think about my own journey, I actually describe it as following my curiosity. I've sort of described to you how I saw athletes at work. I wanted to know why some athletes were consistently better than others. And then, I was curious about other world-class performers. And over time, that's led me to also look at world-class teams and leaders and organisations. Actually, I find the same at work in world-class operators, whether they're individual performers, whether they're leaders, whether they're CEOs or captains of a sports team, whatever they are, they're usually driven by curiosity. They just want to know, "How can I be better? What can I do differently? How can I improve?" And I've heard that articulated in all sorts of different ways over the years.

Simon Hartley:

So a mountaineer, a friend of mine, Alan, who's climbed all of the 14 8,000-metre peaks on Earth, there are only a handful of people who have, and he was one of the first. He described it by saying, "It's not necessarily I want to climb a higher mountain," because he climbed Everest quite early in his mountaineering career, but he wanted to climb a harder mountain. And he said K2 was the biggest mountaineering challenge, but the north face of the Eiger is a huge mountaineering challenge. That's a real tough one. So he wants to know how you climb these. And James, who's the World Barista champion, was always curious about how to not just make better coffee, because you don't win the World Barista Championship just by making the best cup of coffee, but, "How do you serve the best cup of coffee? How do

you create an experience for somebody, and help them enjoy drinking that cup of coffee more than they would somebody else's coffee?

Simon Hartley:

And that curiosity drove him to find the answers, to put them into practise. Usually, you go through that process of you have a little light-bulb moment where you think, "Oh, wow. Yeah, I think I understand it now." You put it into practise, and it doesn't quite work the way you expected. So then, you have to reshape it and go again, and reshape it and go again and learn. And there's this, I call it, yellow brick road of questions and answers. They probably don't even realise that there's a point at which they really do stand out and can be classed as a genuine world-class performer in their field, that they're probably not even aware of that because they're so busy finding the answer to the next question in their mind, that they look back at some point and go, "Oh, wow. Blimey, they've just handed me a world championship," or "I've just become one of the handful of people to climb all 14 8,000-metre peaks." They're not usually chasing a goal because their curiosity is not goal-orientated, but they're just following their passion, their curiosity.

Editor:

It must be lovely for you as well to see these people achieve what they set out to do, to be the best in the world. Now, I was really excited today when I found out that I was going to be chatting with you, Simon. Because for years, I've always thought, "If anything goes pear-shaped, it means it's gone wrong." But I know that that's not your philosophy. Maybe you could tell us about the PEAR model, the P-E-A-R model, that you are famous for.

Simon Hartley:

Yeah. I wrote the book called Motivation Is PEAR-Shaped because of that phrase, people do describe things as going pear-shaped. But I'd also come to realise, and this is something that's dawned on me probably in the last 10-ish years, it sometimes takes me a long time to see the simplicity in something. So if you'd have asked me 20 years ago to describe motivation, I probably would've waffled around the subject quite a lot. It would've appeared quite complex. At the time, when I started out 20, nearly 30 years ago, I often ask people, "Why do you come here and do this stuff, and why do you come here

and do this stuff with us?" And over the years, I thought I was getting hundreds and hundreds of different answers. And then it occurred to me, actually, I've only really heard four. All of those answers either relate to purpose, which is the P of PEAR, and people talking about the difference that we make.

Simon Hartley:

Maybe we change lives, maybe it's that we just make people happy, maybe we save lives, but there's an inherent value to what we do and a real understanding of the importance of what we do. And that's kind of encapsulated within the P of purpose. Some people would talk about the enjoyment, and it might not be that they like the tasks that they do, but maybe they enjoy the camaraderie. Maybe they're surrounded by a great team, maybe they work with great clients, maybe they enjoy the essence of what they do. I know lots of people who maybe don't enjoy selling, if they're salespeople, but they enjoy working with clients, solving problems with them. Sometimes it's the enjoyment of the challenge, that actually the easy stuff is the boring stuff. We like the challenge, we like to be creative, we like the autonomy, but there's an element of our job that we really enjoy.

Simon Hartley:

The A is for ambition and achievement. And that recognises that lots of people really like being good at stuff and feeling like they're good. Whether it's I feel that we are good as an organisation and I'm part of something that's good, or I understand that I'm good at what I do and that I'm improving, developing, growing, that's all great. Some people, they love hitting goals. That comes into that feeling of achievement. But lots of people are really motivated by that feeling of accomplishing things and achieving, and feeling like they're great at what they do. And the art is recognition and reward, which really simply means that we feel like we're recognised and rewarded for what we do. It doesn't purely come into being paid more or getting commissions or bonus checks or incentives. A lot of it, it's simple stuff like giving people a pat on the back and a, "Well done, and a, "Thank you. What you've done really made a difference."

Simon Hartley:

And well as helping me understand that really everybody's motivation falls into these four, it also helped me to understand that, personally, we've got slightly different biases on these four. It's a little bit like personality typing. So if you read into any of the personality type profiles that have spun out of Carl Jung's original work, we start to understand we have all of the personality types, but in different strengths. So there'll be a dominant one in a secondary and a tertiary, and usually a weaker personality type. It's the same with these motivational drivers. As I described them, I'm sure anybody listening would think, "Oh yeah, that kind of describes me. I'm maybe quite achievement-orientated. I really love to win or I love to feel like I'm achieving, or I'm quite purpose-driven." So we can probably see that some of these are stronger than others.

Simon Hartley:

If we looked around at the people we work with, we could see that other people had some stronger drivers and weaker drivers. And that really helps us if we're trying to motivate others because we can tap into that. But for leaders, it helps us to understand that if we built four really strong pillars of motivation in our organisation, then actually we'd motivate most of the people most of the time. And if we did that, the other thing that I realised is that if we've got all four and they're all strong, we create this fifth dimension, and that's that we create a place people are proud to belong to, "They're proud to belong here and do this stuff with us." And in motivational terms, that's enormous.

Editor:

I guess as well for CEOs and anybody who is board level, organisations these days need to spend more time looking after their team. And as you say, rewarding is definitely something that a lot of people strive for. They don't get that recognition, they don't get the arm around the shoulder, the pat on the back, as you say. What do you think organisations could do? What could they change to go from just being good to being truly great, in your mind?

Simon Hartley:

I think it starts by understanding what really does matter to our people. And sometimes, yeah, they will appreciate being paid a little bit more. But

sometimes you can offer things that are not cash bonuses, that actually have more meaning than cash bonuses, mean more to them than a cash bonus would. A few years ago, I worked with the Fiji Rugby Sevens team. And at the turn of the year, we set them the hardest challenge that they'd ever had. It was a really, really hard training week. Physically, it was a hard training week in terms of taking them outside of their comfort zone. It probably took them further than any other week that we'd challenged them with. And their prize, at the end of it...

Simon Hartley:

We created two teams within the squad. And at the end of the week, they played against each other. One wore the home shirts and one wore the away shirts. And there was a prize, at the end of it, for the winning team. And the prize was pizzas and beer, which cost a grand total of 150 Fijian dollars, which is about 50 GB pounds. That motivated that squad to work as hard as they did and push themselves as hard as they did for an entire week, for the prospect of pizzas and beer.

Editor:

That's amazing. I was going to ask, in your experience, what role does enjoyment play in terms of long-term performance? But I guess, that already answers that question, pizzas and beer.

Simon Hartley:

Yeah. Well, enjoyment, I think, is also critical. This is something else that I really learned from working with the Fiji Rugby Sevens team. We had all sorts of performance markers available to us. And in sports science these days, you can measure just about anything. It's the same in business. There are KPIs flying around an organisation. But if you look at what really, really drives performance, laughter in that environment was one of our biggest performance-related KPIs. If our players were having fun and enjoying themselves, there was a very good chance they were going to perform well on the field. If they weren't having fun, if we weren't hearing laughter, we weren't likely to get a good performance on the field. And we were so tuned into this because we realised the impact that laughter had on the scoreboard,

and the enjoyment and fun had on the scoreboard, we could see that direct link.

Simon Hartley:

So making sure that the environment was fun was critical. Yes, it had to be serious as well, and we had to do the hard work, all that sort of stuff. But if the players weren't enjoying it, forget it. It's a waste of time. As I was reflecting on that, I wondered, "How many CEOs are tuned into this? How many organisations have a fun-o-metre on the wall or measure the decibels of laughter in the organisation? How many KPIs are there around enjoyment?" But if we think about how much impact it has on performance, maybe there should be some KPIs around enjoyment and fun and laughter.

Editor:

Absolutely. I know that for many companies, it's almost been a rule-by-fear type of mentality for a lot of managers, a lot of leaders have taken that approach. And I guess, to a certain degree, that has got them results. But what you are saying, Simon, is that actually you may achieve even more if you flip that and go with the laughter, the encouragement, the support, and also the rewards that people strive for. And if you encourage them and give them that environment, they'll perform even better for you.

Simon Hartley:

Yeah. I think you're right, lots of managers traditionally have managed by fear or through fear, and I think it does a couple of things. It might get you some short-term results. Equally though, it might not be that sustainable. I mean, how long does that really last? And how long does it take people to just become numb to it, and not really care anymore? My other question would always be, "So what happens when you're not watching? What do people just naturally do?" Because if we think about the characteristics that we want in our people and the kind of culture, that's going to exist whether we are watching or not. That's our real culture, our authentic culture, and the character that people are exhibiting. And I often talk to leaders about a little philosophy that I call cat herding.

Simon Hartley:

The art of cat herding is to understand, "Why people would choose to... Why would they choose to go the extra mile? Why would they choose to work a little bit harder? Why would they choose to care a little bit more? Why would they choose to care a little bit more about their teammates, about their customers, about the quality of their work? Why would they do that? If you weren't watching, if nobody was watching, why would they choose to do that?" And that sometimes is a question that leaders find difficult to answer. Because they're so used to waving the big stick and banging the drum harder and shouting louder that they haven't really started to think about why people would choose to.

Editor:

It must also be difficult for the leader to remain in that role, in terms of that personality type, for so long. And also, if something then does go wrong, it's very difficult to take that up a notch when you need to.

Simon Hartley:

It's absolutely true. And for a lot of leaders, because it's actually quite inauthentic, that's not them as a person. Maybe they've learned it from previous leaders. Maybe that's culturally the norm within the organisation, and they're gravitating towards that. But if you met that person for beer, would they be that kind of person? For a lot of them, they wouldn't. And therefore, because it's inauthentic, it's also exhausting. They're not getting anything out of it. They're not feeling fulfilled themselves. They're not leading in a way that makes them proud. They wouldn't look at themselves in the mirror when they got home and think, "Yeah, good job. Yeah, I did a good job today. I'm really, really happy with that." And that becomes exhausting. It becomes not particularly sustainable. It leads people to burnout. So it's not just for the benefit of their people, it's also for the benefit of their leader to actually probably lead in a more rounded way.

Editor:

If that person decides to go from being the tyrant in the office to almost a David Brent type of character, or Michael Scott, if you are maybe used to watching the American Office, how do you balance that, Simon? Because obviously, it's very difficult to perhaps work with an organisation if they have

had that leader who has been ruling by fear to try and get them to temper that a little bit. Is that a challenge for you?

Simon Hartley:
If we go back to that word, authentic, which unfortunately has become enormously overused over the years, and probably taken out of context, it's almost become cliche. Authentic means to be yourself. And let's take this wider than leadership. That's a challenge most people have, to be themselves.

Editor:
Mm-hmm.

Simon Hartley:
When I was studying at university and I was studying sports psychology, my tutor encouraged us to look a lot wider than the textbooks on sports psychology, "Start to read wider. Understand human beings from a much more diverse viewpoint." So I read a lot of philosophy. I read quite a lot of Socratic philosophy, so the workings of Socrates, et cetera. And Socrates will say, "You've got to know yourself." Many people would say, "One of those missions in life is to be yourself." And I've come to understand those two are linked with each other, but there's a third dimension. I call them three interwoven strands of rope. To know yourself, to be yourself, to love and accept yourself, are the three strands. When we get these three working in combination, we are very comfortable to be ourselves, to live in our own skin. We don't need to be anybody else.

Simon Hartley:
The ego starts to take a back seat because we're not particularly worried about what others are thinking of us either or whether people are judging us or not, because we're happy just being ourselves and being in our own skin. And it's a really, really powerful place to be. In my experience, it takes a long time to get there. I see relatively few people who genuinely get to a position where they can intertwine those three strands. There are lots of people who I describe sort of the way that ego is trying to fill a hole, and it's the hole where self-worth should be. If we're desperately worried about what other people are thinking of us, and we need our results to validate us, we need promotion, we need other people's approval, we need whatever it is to validate ourselves,

that's a sign that we've got this vacuum-like hole where self-worth should be. And it's ego that's trying desperately to fill that hole.

Simon Hartley:

So if we get to the point where there is no hole because we've got this nice solid foundation of self-worth, because we have those three interwoven strands, "We know ourselves, we like ourselves, we're happy to be ourselves," actually we operate very, very differently. Not just in a work context, but in life. And when I see leaders who are in that position, their leadership is also very, very different. They don't tend to be tyrannical or, equally, the David Brent style of a person that's desperately looking for other people's approval or wanting to be popular, or whatever, because we don't need that anymore.

Editor:

It's great advice. And for anybody who is listening to this or reading this and your words are resonating with them, which of your books would you recommend that they check first?

Simon Hartley:

That's a very good question. Bizarrely, the one that is probably least known is a book called Silence Your Demons. It's a fictional book. I originally wrote it for teenagers to help them with the demons in their heads, all that chaotic stuff that flies around between our ears. And I've learned, having published it, that it's probably more useful for 40, 50, and 60-year-olds than it is for 14, 15, and 16-year-olds. The feedback that I've had from most people of those ages who have read it is, "Why didn't I have access to this when I was younger? I'd love to have read this book when I was in my teens or my 20s. It's unfortunate now that I'm in my 40s, 50s, 60s, and I've only just come across it." So I'd say Silence Your Demons, which is not available on Amazon. We have a dedicated website, silenceyourdemons.co.uk. And that's probably the best one to really understand how this works.

Editor:

That's amazing. So silenceyourdemons.co.uk, perfect.

Simon Hartley:

Yeah.

Editor:

And for anybody who maybe wants to discover more about Simon Hartley and also your body of work, and the books maybe that are available on Amazon, maybe you could tell us a little bit about those books as well?

Simon Hartley:

Yeah. So there's a little journey through all of those. I started by trying to understand my own method. If you'd have asked me 25 years ago, I'd have said, "I don't really have a method. I have a toolbox." Whenever I encounter somebody, I take my toolbox and I'll use whichever tool is most appropriate at that time. And probably after 10, 15 years working, I realised there was a method to it. And then because I'd understood the method, I thought, "Oh, I can communicate this to people, and they can start to use it." Maybe practitioners could start to use it, but people could start to use it in their own mental game. And it was all about how focus, confidence, motivation, all fed each other. And how when we got those things right, we were happier to step outside of our comfort zone. And when we did that, we were happier to release, what I call, our mental handbrake. And then we took a very different view on pressure, and that it's all related.

Simon Hartley:

So when people talk about performing under pressure, we have to get the foundations of focus, confidence, and motivation right in order to get there. So I wrote that into a little book called Peak Performance Every Time, which we published in 2010, and that's just out of a second edition. But whilst I was writing it, I'd started to become really curious about world-class individual performers. "What made the best in the world, the best in the world? How did they think? How did they overcome problems? How did they overcome challenges? What happens when they hit setbacks? How do they deal with those?", that's what I really wanted to understand, "How do they perceive risk?" So I interviewed and worked with 12 world-class performers in vastly different fields, including the Michelin Star chef and the World Barista champion, and wrote that all into a little book called How to Shine.

Simon Hartley:

Whilst I was doing that, another couple of sparks of curiosity were ignited. One, "What about world-class teams then?" So I started researching the very best teams in the world, including Formula One pit crews, racing yacht crews, the Red Arrows, the aerobatic display team, special forces units, all sorts, and figured out that actually there were a set of characteristics that they had as well. And that if teams across the world, business teams or sports teams, whoever they are, adopted these characteristics, they'd become great too. So I published that into a book called Stronger Together. My curiosity that had spiralled off in a slightly different direction took me to wondering how people take on, quote, unquote, "impossible challenges." So I found a bunch of people who had taken on seemingly impossible challenges, talked to them about their experience, but also I wanted to understand this personally through my own experience.

Simon Hartley:

So I took on a daft challenge, and documented what happened between my ears when I hit the hurdles, fell over, got my bloody nose, got back up again. So that's a mixture of both the research and the personal journey of taking on the "impossible challenge." And I wrote that into a little book called Could I Do That? There was another one that spun out of my research into world-class teams. I discovered, and this is going to make me sound really stupid, I know, when you find world-class teams, you tend to find world-class leaders. So when I research world-class teams, I ended up researching world-class leadership, even though I haven't planned to. It struck me afterwards that the world-class teams and leaders tend to go hand-in-hand. And one of the things that I've noticed is that world-class leaders were great at leading through influence, cat herding, as I call it. So there was a book that was supposed to be a chapter in Stronger Together that ended up becoming a book in its own right called How to Herd Cats.

Editor:

I love the fact that you enjoy this so much. It's really inspiring to see how not only have you gone from the sports psychology, that you've embraced all of human psychology as well. And yourself, you are striving to be the best. I think that's a really kind of an amazing character trait to have. For anybody

who is wanting to find out more about you, and maybe the background of your work as well, is there a website they could go to?

Simon Hartley:

There is, and it's got a really stupid URL, which I won't give you. But we do have a free resource page on the website, worldclassresources.com. It'll take you to a page where you can pick up free resources. And lots of what we've been talking about is held within the site, so you can navigate to the site from that page if you want to find out more. There's documentaries and there's podcasts, there's all sorts of things on there which you can get. But the free resources will also send... We've got a programme called Podium Mindset, and there's a little espresso version to get people started on their own journey, which is the free resource that they can grab through that page.

Editor:

I'll definitely check that out myself off the back of this. So thank you, Simon. One final question from me, I guess, is what's next for you? What are you working on next? What is your next big challenge?

Simon Hartley:

I've got some personal challenges. One is that I'm learning to fly, at the moment. So I've got one more exam in my pilot's training, and probably another maybe 10 flying hours to do before I qualify as a pilot. That's been a huge challenge, so far. That's really taken me outside of my comfort zone. Professionally, we have a conference coming up. It's our sixth big conference event. And because I'm a ridiculously ambitious individual as well, we've doubled the size of the audience for this one. So that's a challenge. I've also got to navigate my way through my own 50th birthday. That'll be a toughie.

Editor:

Good luck.

Simon Hartley:

And the project that we kicked off last year is a documentary series called This is Mental, helping people take on their own big, hairy, audacious, scary goals. We are looking at taking that from a pilot into a proper broadcast series. So

that's one of the other challenges I've got on my plate at the moment, as well as the next book, which is a seedling in my mind at the moment.

Editor:
How do you rest? When do you take a moment to yourself?

Simon Hartley:
Resting is easy because I'm exhausted by the end of all this.

Editor:
Well, Simon, it's been an absolute pleasure chatting with you. I could chat with you for hours, but thank you so much for your time today.

Simon Hartley:
Thank you.

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