

5 Clive Woodward's 1% Theory

The idea that consistent excellence comes from small improvements compounding over time is intellectually easy to accept and behaviourally very difficult to sustain. Most organisations invest in dramatic change rather than in patient, incremental improvement, because dramatic change is visible and marginal gains are not. The case for shifting this is straightforward. The challenge is building the culture that makes it possible.

Most performance problems that organisations diagnose as requiring significant structural change are, on closer inspection, the accumulated product of small standards that have been quietly allowed to slip. The meeting that starts five minutes late. The feedback that is kept comfortable rather than made useful. The process that everyone knows is inefficient but that nobody has examined seriously in three years. Individually, none of these things feels consequential. Together, and over time, they set the ceiling of what the organisation can produce.

The reverse is also true. Small improvements, compounded across enough dimensions and sustained over enough time, produce results that look from the outside like sudden transformation. Clive Woodward's work with England's rugby programme between 1997 and 2003 is one of the clearest available examples of what this looks like when it is built with genuine commitment, and what it takes to sustain it.

The Drop Goal and What It Hid

England won the Rugby World Cup in Australia in November 2003. The final score was 20 to 17, decided by a drop goal from Jonny Wilkinson in extra time. It was a dramatic ending, and it produced exactly the kind of narrative that sport tends to generate: a single moment, a single player, a single heartbeat of skill under pressure. That image – Wilkinson's right boot meeting the ball twenty seconds from the end of extra time in Sydney