



# How to Achieve Your Gold Standard

All high achievers have failure in their slipstream. Britain's double Olympic gold medal winning rower, **Alex Gregory**, tells **Mary-Anne Baldwin** how he turned his potential into performance

**F**or a double Olympic gold winner, **Alex Gregory**, is relatively disinterested in sports. Beyond rowing he doesn't watch, play, or keep track of it. Yet, for his profession he's trained three times a day, seven days a week, 350 days a year. It begs the question, what motivates him to do it?

At a recent Criticaleye [Member Dinner](#), the recently retired Alex shared not only what's fuelled him to succeed, but how he overcame a spiral of pressure and failure to win it big at the Olympics, both at London and Rio. It's a story that many ambitious high performers could learn from.

With an unusual mix of personal humility and professional pride, Alex started by explaining how he first got into rowing. "I fell into it, quite literally after a friend at school pestered me to try it. I stepped into the boat, fell out the other side and into the stinking Avon river water. Immediately I knew it was what I wanted to do," he shared.

It was the first of many career misfortunes, including passing out in the middle of his first attempt to win the World Rowing Championships, and missing the chance to qualify for the Beijing Olympics in 2008 because of a fractured rib. Unable to train a

replacement in time, his three team mates also lost their chance to row at Beijing. It was Alex's lowest point.

"That marked six years of failing to reach my potential," he says. "I really felt it was time to walk away for good, but I was then thrown a lifeline by Jürgen Gröbler, Chief Coach of the men's British heavy weight rowing team. He asked me to be the Olympic rowing team's reserve."

The break not only took him to the Beijing Olympics, but gave Alex his first opportunity to honestly assess himself. It sparked a series of career changing revelations. >



## You Will Outgrow Your Coach

In his early days, Alex was trained by his history teacher who happened to be a former rowing coach. Seeing potential in his protégé, Alex's teacher quit his job to train the rower full time.

That experience meant a lot to the Olympian, but the relationship could only go so far, in part because Alex found it hard to be open about his failings in this dynamic. "He'd taken a risk on me and sacrificed his career to train me, but I built a barrier against him because I didn't ever want him to see me as weak. I was worried about letting him down," he shared.

Things changed when Alex took a new coach, the brusquely accented, no-nonsense Jürgen – who happened to be the world's most successful rowing coach. Alex had to adapt to a new leadership style and this time the onus was on performance, not bravado.

"Jürgen sets the culture, you either fall into line or you don't make it into the boat. There have been many rowers before me who were much better but were shown the backdoor because, for whatever reason, they didn't fit with Jürgen's culture – or haven't wanted to. If you can't perform consistently, he can't trust you. I knew I needed to do whatever I could for him to accept me," he explained.

**The message:** The relationship with your coach, mentor, or chairman must be founded on trust and respect. However, even the most valuable of partnerships will evolve over time until there is nothing more they can do for you. Accept that it's time to move on, but also that you'll have to adapt to your new confidant.

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## Take Time to Self-Reflect

Perched on a set of crumbling concrete steps at the Beijing Olympics where he was a reserve, Alex watched the Britain's coxless four win a race he'd waged a personal war to be in. It was tough, but it gave him perspective.

"Seeing that team perform at the Beijing Olympics was the first time I could step back and reflect. There was no pressure on me to perform, no expectation. It was a pivotal moment," he explained. While watching, Alex noticed that all of the rowers in front of him carried an extra 10kg of muscle.

"I realised that after every disaster I just went back to the river and continued to work on my technique, tweaking what I was already good at. My coach and I were high-fiving each other thinking we were progressing but actually we were wasting time. What I really needed to work on was my overall physical strength. I hadn't seen it until that point. Suddenly the pressure was off because I knew how to take personal responsibility."

**The message:** Successful leaders will be driven to get results but often at the cost of taking time to self-reflect. Pushing on without perspective means you can easily ignore that last winning ingredient. Working on your weakness, while tough on your ego, often gets better results than focusing on your strengths.



## Acknowledge the Power of Purpose

While watching British rower, Mark Hunter, in the lightweight men's race at Beijing, Alex recognised the importance of purpose beyond personal success.

"I happened to be sat behind Mark's mum, dad and brother. Even before Mark put his boat on the river his family were holding each other tight, crying with excitement and nerves. Emotions were pouring off them and onto me. It hit me hard that this wasn't the selfish pursuit I thought it was. I wasn't in it alone," he realised.

"Saying I wanted to win the Olympics was just words flapping in the wind until I saw Mark's family and realised I wanted that experience for my own. This new motivation felt like fuel. It's like my family have been in the boat with me every day since then."

Alex credits this revelation for his success one year later at the 2009 World Championships in Poland, where he won gold. Two years on and he'd taken his second World Championship gold medal, this time in Slovenia.

"I'd flipped from wanting to leave the sport for good to finally winning, and it was because I had purpose. I knew why I wanted to do it. Things were progressing really well. I was starting to learn how to perform," he shared.

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**The message:** Ambition will only get you so far, especially when all those around you also want to be the best. A greater purpose – one beyond your own personal desires – will give you extra resolve.

*“The best leaders will take strength from the unity of a solid team”*

## Learn from Those Around You

Every British Olympic team competing in the coxless four race carries one person from the previous Olympics, so that others can learn from them. It's a tactic of Jürgen's, who's won gold at every Olympics since his first in 1972.

When Alex made it to the London Olympics in 2012, he competed with three of the four men to have won the coxless four race before in Beijing – Tom James, Pete Reed and Andrew Triggs Hodge.

"I found myself with Britain's top male rowers. We were going for Great Britain's fourth consecutive win, which no nation had ever done. The pressure and expectation was back, but knowing I was with people who had seen victory before calmed me," he said. "I'd learnt to take note of who else was in the boat and what I could learn from them."

Alex was the only one from the London Olympics team to stay on and race at Rio, helping his team carry the burden of a run of five Olympic wins. Yet he also found something to learn from each of those new faces – Stan Louloudi, Moe Sbihi and George Nash.

Having learnt from this, Alex advised: "Find out who's been in the boat before you and how you can improve based on their experiences. Being the least experienced means you'll gain the most, but there are always opportunities to improve if you're able to see where others are better than you."

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**The message:** The best leaders will take strength from the unity of a solid team. Benchmarking yourself against them in a constructive, rather than challenging way, will help you develop. Access to people who have been 'in the boat before' – whether they're from your team or beyond – can help you reflect on where you are and what you must do to succeed.



## Talk It Out (even if you don't want to)

Eight weeks before the London Olympics, Alex and his team were beaten by Australia, their main rivals. It was the chance to gain another crucial insight.

"Throughout the season, we all knew that something wasn't right. We weren't gelling but we'd won enough races to shroud the problem," Alex explained. He drew on the help of Sir Matthew Pinsent, winner of 10 World Championship gold medals and four consecutive Olympic gold medals.

"We went round to his house for two hours that same night," said Alex. "From my point of view he was a hero – I saw him as bigger, better and stronger than everyone else, but telling us about all the struggles he'd had with injuries and last minute crew changes really put us at ease.

"In fact, he'd been in a very similar situation having been beaten shortly before his last Olympic race in Athens. He told me that the team dealt with it by opening up communication and talking honestly for the first time. We realised we hadn't been doing that," he continued.

"It's not natural for me to confront people about things but the crew decided to give each other some really honest feedback, including both positives and criticism. We came to an agreement on how we would approach every stroke at the Olympics – and that's what won us the race."

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**The message:** Open, honest discussion with your team – no matter how uncomfortable – is the quickest way to dissolve hidden grievances and improve performance. Drawing on advice from others can also provide external reference points, giving you a framework for that team discussion.

### COMMUNITY COMMENT



**Charlie Wagstaff**  
Managing Director  
Criticaleye

Listening to Alex, it was clear that if you want something you've never had, you must be willing to do something you have never done. Like Alex, leaders need self-reflection and adjustment to realise their potential.

Alex looked to others in his boat for support, but CEOs often find it very hard to do that with their immediate team. To ask for help from your executive peers is to admit that you can't walk on water. The best CEOs will find mentors and external support to do that.



**Alex Gregory**  
Athlete at British Rowing  
& Motivational speaker

Double Olympic Champion and multiple World Champion, Alex Gregory has been a full member of the men's rowing squad since 2006 and was awarded the MBE in the 2013 New Year's Honours list.

He has twice been crowned Olympic Champion with the men's four – at London 2012 and Rio 2016 – and won five World Championship gold medals.

The proud father of Jasper, Daisy and Jesse, Alex is patron of the British Exploring youth charity and a graduate of the GB Rowing Team Start Programme, the development initiative supported by National Lottery funding. He is also the current captain of Leander Club.

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