



Optimizing Worker Wellbeing and Achievement:

Insights From Performance Psychology

PART III: Mental Skills Training

Abstract

The purpose of this section is to determine how performance psychology can increase wellbeing and achievement, as well as potentially buffer the stress response experienced within performance climates. Key aspects that make up global mental skills training interventions will be addressed and effectiveness of intervention will be depicted.

A primary aim of the field of Performance Psychology is to enable individuals to function better and more consistently in endeavors where excellence counts¹.

Though we typically associate optimal performance with outcome variables (wins, losses, demonstrated proficiency, etc.), the developments that lead to these conclusive-results are of importance as well. Therefore, Aoyagi and Portenga have defined "performance" as **the process of developing the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) in a given domain, followed by the successful recall and demonstration during a discrete event²**. The temporal dimensions of the aforementioned "discrete event" should not go unstated. As performances that lack a specific time frame will be more difficult to ascertain relevant effects from consultation. However, the temporal domain is not the only facet that is important to performance. Performance (particularly poor performance) also has consequences, is subject to social stress, and is inherently pressure-filled.

Performance Psychology encompasses the preparation toward an important event and the demonstration of skill during.

It's about consistently going from "good" to "great" not only for poor performers.

An important distinction of the field is that it is more so concerned with the development of emotional and psychological skills, rather than fixing psychoemotional disturbance through diagnosis and treatment of disorder². For this reason, performance psychology relies on certification to denote competence rather than licensure. This realization, and perhaps counter to the prevailing view of society, has led performance psychology consultants to not always be retained to help individuals work through issues, or to address problem behavior, as the field can also be utilized as a means to maintain and sustain optimal psychological performance as well, typically through mental skills training.

MENTAL SKILLS TRAINING

Mental Skills Training (MST) is considered the primary method utilized by performance psychology consultants to enhance performance. The mechanisms underpinning intervention effectiveness are thought to be (1) a mitigation of degradation in cognitive function and motor behavior attributed to the fear cascade through enhanced emotional regulation, and (2) the optimization of attentional processes by freeing up resources to allow for enhanced function (multitasking, attentional switching, etc.) through increased cognitive control. Some consider fine tuning in motor planning and execution as well, attributed to the visualization process.

Mental Skills Training teaches clients to utilize goal setting, self-talk, relaxation and imagery as a means to feel more confident, motivated and in control of emotional state.

MST exists as a set of desirable subjective conceptualizations of performer mental status (self-efficacy, motivation, emotional regulation, attentional control, flow-state, etc.). Tools are introduced as a means to influence and enhance the aforementioned competencies, as most interventions utilize some combination of goal

setting, self-talk, relaxation, and imagery. While interventions centering on mindfulness, meditation and heart rate variability biofeedback are often considered alongside MST and have shown effectiveness at enhancing performance in their own right³⁻⁶, it is important to distinguish between the modalities. As mindfulness/meditation interventions often solely focus on emotional/arousal regulation without incorporation of mental skills to increase quality of specific performances.

As such, global, multiple-intervention MST programs have been shown to enhance performance across several domains that experience high levels of stress (sport⁷, surgery⁸, military⁹, police¹⁰, music¹¹).

The next section goes into detail about the specific interventions that typically encompass an MST program.

GOAL SETTING

Goal Setting is a semi-intuitive process, however a more thorough understanding and commitment to the utilization will increase performance and enhance outcomes.

Locke and Latham's Goal Setting Theory draws its roots from the field of Industrial/Organizational Psychology. As part of the original research, Edwin Locke defined a goal simply as 'what an individual is trying to accomplish; it is the object or aim of an action'¹² p.126). Over 25 years of research and 400 laboratory and field studies have led the researchers to ascertain that specific, yet difficult goals lead to higher levels of task performance than easy or vague "do-your-best" goals¹³. Since this time, researchers have also shed light on the necessity of feedback and deadlines, as well as potential moderators such as ability and self-efficacy. The aforementioned individual goal disposition (from Part II of the series) is also important to consider, as goals centric on mastery instead of performance lead to higher performance.

SELF-TALK

Operational definitions of constructs are essential to validity of measurement. General conceptualizations of sport psychology tools have been put forth for various notions, perhaps none moreso than Self-talk. Hackfort and Schwenkmezger proposed that self-talk was a "dialogue [through which] the individual interprets feelings and perceptions, regulates and changes evaluations and convictions, and gives him/herself instructions and reinforcement"¹⁴ (p. 355). Hardy, Gammage, and Hall propose that self-talk can either be cognitive (functions such as the execution of skills and development of strategies) or motivational (psyching-up, increasing self-confidence, and regulating anxiety)¹⁵:

Self-talk is one's internal or external dialogue, typically aimed at increasing motivation, confidence, or technical performance.

RELAXATION

The ability to control psychophysiological state during specific, meaningful segments of time is at the heart of importance to the field of performance psychology. While certain personality traits may contribute to an individual being able to self-regulate psychophysiological state in the moment, novelty, and complexity play pivotal roles as well. Psychophysiological state can be better thought of as a level of arousal in the brain, attributed and reciprocated by emotional state. Implications for muscular, hormonal, and chemical aspects of the body are readily apparent. In order to ease in conceptualization, "state" is commonly associated with the physiological cascade stemming from heightened emotions/arousal. This is thought to be attributed to the emotional state of fear, and the biological, survival-driven proclivity of humans to experience the negativity bias leads to manifestations in instances of real or imagined danger. Relaxation strategies in performance psychology target the arousal felt from this perception, ultimately bringing the level down to enable optimal cognitive, emotional, social and motor performance (depending on the initial level).

IMAGERY

Imagery (sometimes called visualization) is defined as the ability to use the senses to create or recreate an experience within the mind. Several different purposes for the use of the modality exist, commonly to (1) identify contingencies, (2) build a mental blueprint, and (3) prime emotional responses. Being as such, imagery has proven to be a useful tool to (1) prepare for specific performances, (2) aid in wound healing, and (3) enhance motor behavior. Imagery is typically practiced in script format, either spoken aloud to one's self or listened through an audio device. It incorporates the five senses (smell, touch, hear, see and taste) to build realistic representation within the mind.

STRESS AND CLIMATE

Previous sections elucidated the type of demands that organizational requirements place on individuals that may increase the feeling of burnout. While the partnership type of structuring of law-firms and the increased competition as a means to advance within the organization may not be going away any time soon, **performance psychology consultation may aid individuals in creating a stress buffer while in performance-involving climates¹⁶.** The type of mental skills training within this demographic is typically an achievement-goal intervention, aiding individuals to base their own competence on effort and improvement rather than comparison to peers. However, conceptually it would also be advantageous to create interventions that allow performers to experience their best self through goal setting, self-talk, imagery and relaxation-based strategies.

CONCLUSION

At face value, the utility of performance psychology services within the legal profession may not be wholly apparent. Part of this can be attributed to the rather wide-reaching key performance indicators to what makes an effective lawyer or attorney. When considering the previous sections, aspects become more clear. At a very base level, **most performances within the law community rely on cognitive, emotional and social function instead of the skillful execution of motor movement that is prevalent in the field of sport.** Though the projection of effective performance differs according to medium, degradation due to acute stress can be witnessed all the same, providing an opportunity for goal setting, self-talk, relaxation and imagery intervention.

Within lawyer performance, typically the temporal dimensions are specific and well-defined. As an example, litigators cross examine a witness, or make closing arguments during a specific time for a specific duration. The ramifications for not properly controlling emotional or arousal state within the performance of litigation are apparent. An inability to make the correct decision during a line of questioning, exhibiting an improper emotional response via body language or facial expression viewable by judge or jury may be suitable examples. A prolonged state of fight-or-flight may also limit sensory input to hear and learn from feedback during trial experiences as well. Most of the same can be said for depositions and negotiations. As when these performances are not thoroughly thought-out nor planned, the client may be put in a compromising position.

Though the temporal dimensions of performance are important, the *process* lawyers take to achieve optimal performance is also a defining point within performance psychology. The excessive demands and increased hourly requirements of examining paperwork, remembering key ideas and exhibiting flexibility to think adaptively in the creation of alternative hypotheses are factors that should be considered.

Within many law firms client loyalty is also top of concern and mind, meaning another example of "performance" may also be in a targeted client interaction¹⁷. Aside from the necessity of positive social interaction to increase client satisfaction, the knowledge of client needs and desires are a goal in and of itself¹⁷. This type of social performance places new emphasis on meaningful, positive experiences and interactions.

Whereas mindfulness and meditation initiatives may help individuals feel more relaxed and less stress reactive, performance psychology theories and skills may (1) enable higher achievement via sustained cognitive, emotional and social function, as well as (2) mitigate the effects of demanding motivational climates.

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