

The Inner Game of Leadership

Making Exceptional Business Leaders

By Louis Csoka



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EXECUTIVE OVERVIEW

Peak performance is about performing at your very best when it matters the most – and it matters the most in critical situations where one action changes everything! Knowing what that is and when to do it is the key to success in work and life. Peak performance can be learned. But most leadership training today is inadequate and too narrow in focus to enable lifelong learning to be achieved for a leader to develop “on command” peak performance behaviors.

Leadership training in today’s world consists mostly of re-naming, re-framing and re-packaging techniques that are 20-30 years old. We call this knowledge the “Know” and the techniques the “Do” of leadership. While many of these techniques are essential to start to learn how to be an effective leader, they only provide short term change and benefits. They do not address the core foundation of leadership.

The foundation I speak of comes from within – the ability of an individual to adapt to the circumstances, think effectively under pressure and develop focused solutions while communicating efficiently with others. We call this the “Be” of leadership.

Perhaps you are facing a critical juncture in an M&A negotiation, or a particularly challenging sales call, or even an interview with a grueling market analyst? In all these situations, there are moments that require your best performance. These moments often define success versus mediocrity or failure. How well you perform at this moment is not a function of whether or not you “know” what needs to be done. It is about trusting your intuition and your heart, using adaptive thinking and being able to bring that to bear on the right action. This is the foundation and the edge that the most effective leaders have over average leaders.

Why is this foundation missing in today’s training? The simple answer is that it is difficult to develop using traditional methods and there is no magic pill or class that will lay the foundation.

By developing people to think more effectively and to control their emotional and physiological responses, APEX Performance helps leaders to achieve resilience, self confidence, adaptability and mental agility. Our unique approach is to develop and measure these skills using advanced sensory feedback technology and a proven systematic process that I originally created nearly 20 years ago at West Point. Ultimately, improving these skills results in a more positive and effective thinker who can control his/her emotional and physiological response to any situation. This in turn yields enhanced leadership through better personal interactions, improved decision making and innovative problem solving. This is how you learn to “be” the leader you need to be. This is what the inner game of leadership is all about.

I invite you to read on and learn more.

THE INNER GAME OF LEADERSHIP: Making Exceptional Business Leaders

A Tale of Two Moments: The Locker Room and the Board Room

Army-Navy, 1992. Fourth quarter with two minutes and 30 seconds remaining. You are the field goal kicker for Army. In the last 8 minutes of the game, Army has just delivered a remarkable fourth quarter comeback to within two points from a 14-point deficit. The crowd is absolutely wild! Army has the ball and is driving down the field but gets stalled on the 27-yard line with 40 seconds remaining. It is fourth down. A field goal is the only chance for winning the game. It is up to you. You have kicked a 44-yarder only once before during the season. The ball is snapped. It is in the air and it is good! The stadium erupts in wild celebration. Your teammates rush onto the field. You have beaten Navy in the most important moment of your life as a West Point athlete. But wait! There is a flag. Delay of game by Army and a five yard penalty. Kick it again. But now it is a 49-yard kick. You have never even attempted that distance before, let alone make it. The ball is snapped. It is in the air and travels dead center through the uprights, with yards to spare. Army wins 25-24! You have delivered an extraordinary performance.

12 years later. You are the CEO of a \$3 billion company. The company strategy has been to grow through acquisitions. Your M&A team has been working the first big deal for over 10 months. After long and difficult negotiations, agreement has finally been reached. Now it's just a matter of taking care of the formalities and a most important acquisition can become reality. But wait! There is a call from the other company. The CEO of the other company now wants to have a telephone conversation with only you, tomorrow morning, eight o'clock sharp! All of a sudden, the entire deal comes down to a telephone call where the outcome is dependent entirely on your personal performance. You make the call and you're at your best. The deal is sealed! You have delivered an extraordinary personal performance.

Two very different situations; two virtually identical explanations. Both real situations. These individuals enhanced their ability to perform at their absolute best under tremendous pressure by engaging in a systematic training program that developed critical mental competencies needed for this kind of performance. Such training and preparation for peak performance is readily accepted today in the locker room, but rarely in the boardroom. The preparation and execution described by peak performers are much the same regardless of their profession. The key ingredients are finely honed peak performance competencies that enhance mental preparedness. Too often business leaders feel they do not need any special training or preparation to be at their best, that their past experiences and successes will carry the day.

At Apex Performance, we don't believe this to be true.

The Problem: Unrelenting Challenges and Impossible Expectations

Each and every day, business leaders face seemingly endless challenges brought on by external forces and events. Unlike athletes, business leaders are “in the game” all the time. There is no clearly defined time frame, no practice period, no off-season. To be successful, both individually and organizationally, they must be at their best each and every day. Consider the following summary of every day business challenges for today’s executive:

- **Relentless Pressure to Deliver.** This has become especially challenging with the emphasis on cost cutting and downsizing. Inevitably, these lead to fewer people doing more and more and more. No matter how hard you try, at some point there just is not enough time in the day or the resources to get it done. Over time, this can lead to overload and a sense of feeling overwhelmed.
- **Rapidly Changing Skill Requirements and Job Assignments.** With all the downsizing, the survivors typically are asked to engage in many tasks with which they are unfamiliar and for which they have not been trained or prepared. Thrust into such situations, the chances for failing are very high. The learning curve for acquiring skills and tasks that are very different is acute. Over time this can lead to a loss of confidence.
- **Empowerment and Emphasis on Teams.** Companies have come to widely adopt the use of teams as a means for increasing efficiency and productivity. However, using teams can lead to unintended consequences. Many people are very comfortable and highly productive as individual contributors, but not so when placed on teams. They find themselves very uncomfortable with the added requirement of being accountable and responsible for teammates. For them, the sense of responsibility for the team and the added accountability for others’ performance can be stressful.
- **Transformation of Work through Technology.** Technology has transformed the way we live, work and play. We marvel at what technology has done to enhance our lives. However, with the good have come the bad and the ugly – the emails, the voicemails, the Blackberries, the laptops, the PDA’s, etc. In other words, what was supposed to be anywhere, anytime has become everywhere, all-the-time! It has intruded every aspect of our lives. Given a finite amount of time in the day, we allow the demands on our time from work to creep into our family time, and if our family life is important to us, we push that demand further into our personal time. Eventually we notice that there is little or no personal time. In the extreme, we can lose a sense of our own individuality. As a minimum, it can lead to guilt when we do choose family and personal time over work. Ultimately, technology can lead to uncertainty about work-life balance in general.
- **Discontinuous Change.** Change is the constant. It is an overused phrase but none the less true. In order to adapt to the world around us and to the daily changes that come about as we grow and develop, we come to expect change and for the most part handle it fairly well. Of course, there are differences in how well we do adapt. In any case, this kind of change, which we call continuous, follows a linear path and is easier to predict and accommodate. There is another kind of change, however, that can disturb and upset the predictability we all seek in life. This is called discontinuous change. It is sudden, unexpected and unanticipated and catches us by surprise.

On a national level, it is the 9/11 attacks and the Katrina storm. In our personal lives, it is the sudden death of a loved one or the unexpected loss of a job. Discontinuous change can create an extended period of loss of direction and purpose, a blurred vision of tomorrow.

The cumulative effect of all of the above is lots and lots of pressure and stress. The problem is that these are not going away. In fact, they will continue and become even more pervasive in our lives. To be able to survive and even thrive under these conditions, we realistically have only three courses of action:

1. We can always opt out of the situation, and sometimes we do.
2. We can attempt to eliminate the causes of the stress, which most of the time is out of our control or not possible.
3. We can significantly improve the way we personally respond to the pressure and stress, physiologically, mentally and emotionally. These responses will determine our level of performance and eventually our success.

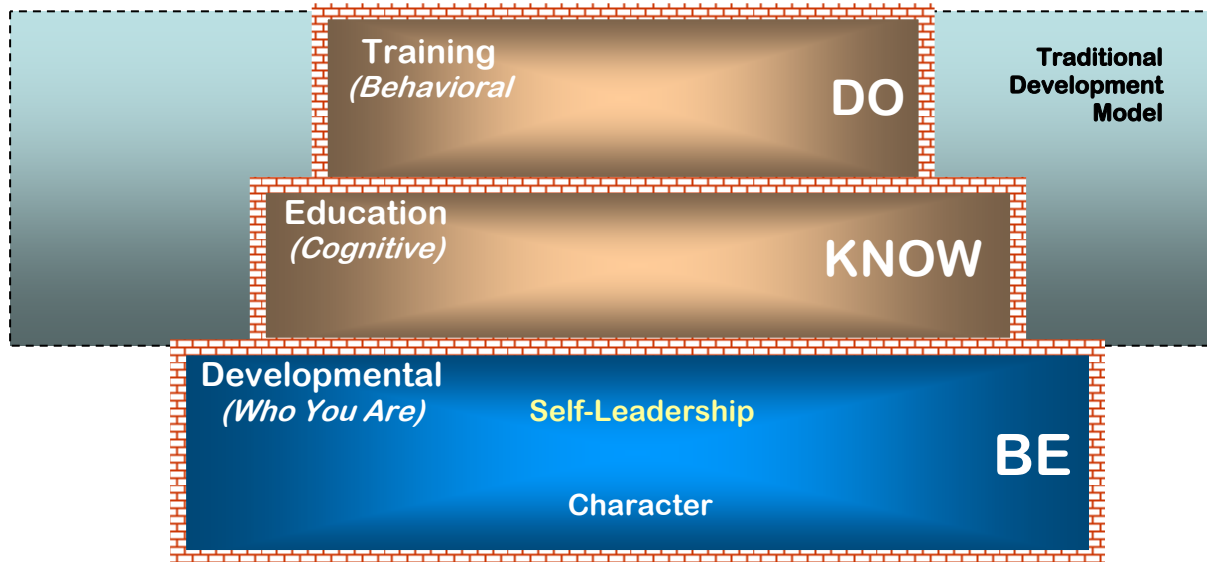
The Myth of Motivation. Too many firms seek out motivational speakers and self-help books for answers when the real performance advantage comes from within. Ask any peak performer. Be wary of books that teach how to motivate people. You can't. Real motivation is internal. It is something that individuals must develop for themselves. It is all about inspiration and passion. Leaders can influence the likelihood that their followers will find the inspiration, drive and passion to excel, but they cannot motivate. It is certainly their job to help them. But ultimately it must come from within oneself. This is why self-awareness, self-control and self-management are so key in achieving exceptional performance. The competencies in our peak performance model are at the heart of self-awareness, self-control, and self-mastery.

Leaders as Peak Performers

Many say that the first principle of leadership is knowing whom you lead. On the contrary, the first principle of leadership is knowing who you are. You cannot successfully lead others until you have learned to lead yourself, and leading yourself is all about self-mastery - mastery over what you think, say and do. After all, these are the only things you can directly control. I have found that business leaders especially pride themselves in saying that they exercise control over a myriad of activities, events and people. However, in truth, other than what they think, say and do, not much else is in their direct control. That is not to say that they do not exercise influence, but influence and control are distinctively different. Once managers accept this basic tenet, real leadership can occur.

Be, Know, Do. Leader development programs need a framework to guide the education, training and experiential activities supporting it. We have been using the framework developed at West Point and the US Army. It is simple yet elegant. (See Figure 1.) Traditional corporate learning models have focused primarily on the KNOW and DO, i.e., education programs to increase knowledge and training programs to change behavior. But few have addressed the BE. We have found in many organizations a reluctance to even address this element of leadership. Yet, leadership is all about the BE. It is all about knowing the essence of the individual leading – how they think, what they say and what they do.

Figure 1: US Army Be-Know-Do Leader Development Model



Using a leadership framework as depicted above, organizations can focus much more on developing the BE part of leadership, which in our framework relates to self-leadership and self-mastery. Peak performance competencies are life skills. Once mastered, they become a key part of who you are and how you function, at work, at home, in your personal life.

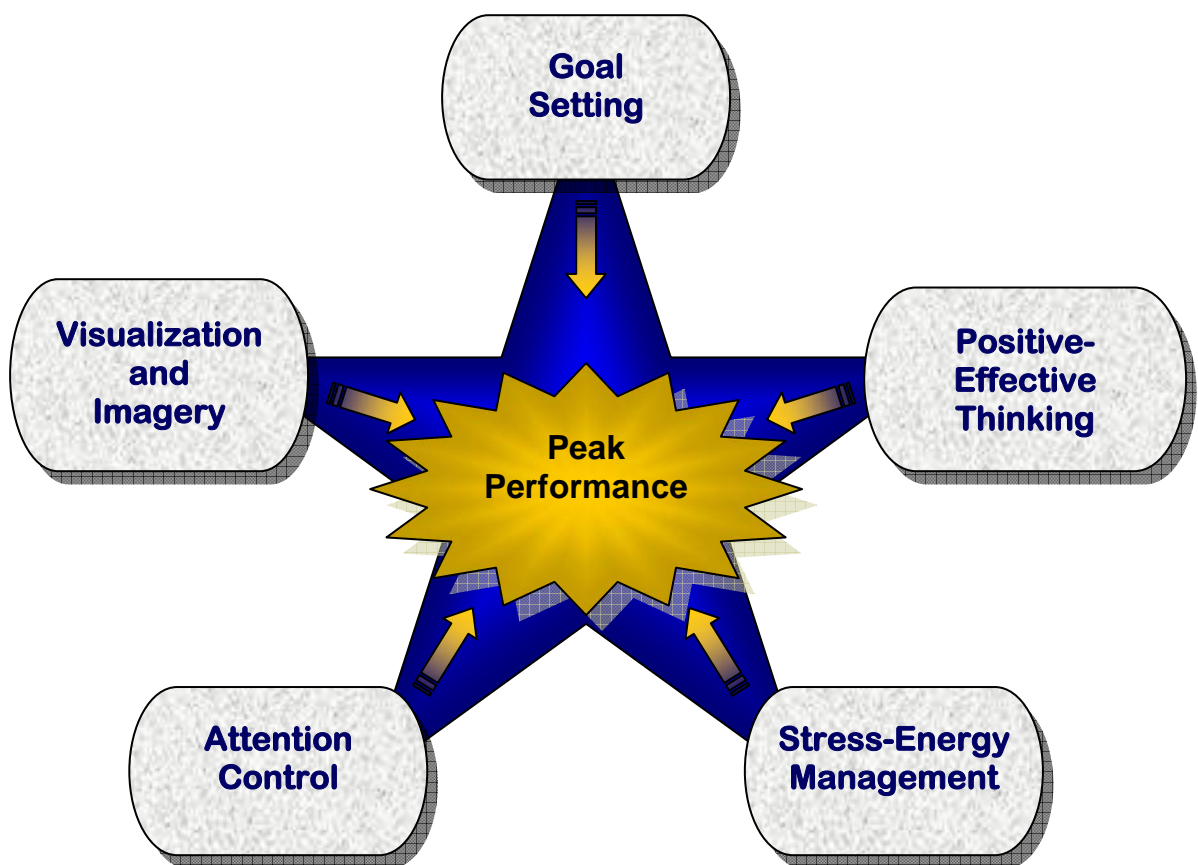
Self-Leadership Is About Inner Control. We have seen for some time now that elite athletes compete against each other with relatively equal skills and abilities. Yet some dominate the field and repeat as champions over and over again. The major differentiator is mental preparedness – the ability to be in “the zone,” to focus on the present with no thought of the past or future, concentrating only on what you are doing, not on how you are doing. This is especially challenging for business leaders who constantly face questions from analysts and shareholders about how the company is doing. It is, of course, very important to keep an eye on the financial performance of the company, for the long term; but in the day-to-day performance of a business leader, best results are obtained with total focus on the performance requirement at the moment! Elite performers are exceptionally good at this! The key aspect of superior performance is inner control, control over mental, emotional and physiological states that are present in every performance situation. That control is exercised through well-developed peak performance competencies. Without mastery of these, business professionals cannot hope to repeat and sustain exceptional performance under pressure without the inevitable consequences on leadership effectiveness, team and organizational performance, and ultimately, their own health and welfare.

The Solution: Learning to Deliver Consistent, Exceptional Performance

Of course, most business leaders do learn to adapt and adjust to achieve effectiveness under trying and changing conditions. But in these times of unparalleled global competition, the question has to be asked, “Is being effective good enough?” Without competition, it is. But competition changes everything. Everyone has to perform to their very best. Being effective just won’t carry the day for the long haul. Besides, psychologists continually remind us that the human spirit is such that people want to excel. I never met a person who wants to be just ordinary!

Taking the lead from their brothers and sisters in athletics, business leaders too can develop the mental competencies that significantly increase the chances for delivering exceptional performance. For the past 16 years, we have been developing and applying a systematic approach to peak performance that integrates the science of performance psychology, advanced sensory feedback technology, and personalized coaching for elite athletes, military professionals and business leaders alike. First created at the US Military Academy at West Point by the author and since significantly advanced and adapted for a broader audience, the program consists of a Peak Performance Center and accompanying training protocols that focus on mastering the five peak performance competencies depicted below.

Figure 2: APEX Performance Model



As in any training and development process, quality and accurate feedback are essential for learning. Since peak performance competencies are internal, learning to master them is best achieved with advanced biofeedback and neurofeedback technologies that measure covert activities like heart rate variability, respiration, blood pressure, brain activity, etc. Once the domain of clinicians and biofeedback therapists, we now use these technologies to provide accurate and measurable feedback as the individual learns to master control over mental, physiological and emotional responses to demanding and challenging events. Research in performance psychology continues to validate the importance and effectiveness of the competencies depicted in our five-point model.

How Does It Work?

Goal Setting: Eyes on the Prize. Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, “The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving.” A journey starts with knowing where you want to end up. This is especially true for anyone who wants to begin the journey to becoming a peak performer, to reach one’s full potential. Setting goals is relatively easy. Making them happen is not. A key part of any lasting goal setting process is the idea of a mission. Knowing and living a mission provides the motivation and perseverance to forge ahead when the going gets tough. It is much more than having a goal.

Much has been written about goal setting and goal setting techniques. Our approach to setting the target is not so much about a technique as it is a process for identifying what one really wants to accomplish, the inclusive smaller steps needed to get there, and the positive mindset necessary for ensuring enduring determination. Stopping with a list of goals and objectives is just not enough. It does not activate the energy needed to see them through to completion. They must be deliberately connected to our daily thoughts and self-talk. Transforming objectives, which in their simplest form are actions, into affirmations connects what we are doing with what we are thinking. Recording these affirmations on a CD and having people listen to them regularly, we mimic the way very young children learn language at home - hearing it repeatedly, creating new neural pathways. After completing our goal-setting process, a CEO of a \$3B health care company said, “I have done goal setting exercises before. We in business do this all the time. But taking it to the next levels is something I had not done before. The power of this process is truly remarkable.”

Positive-Effective Thinking: Confidence. Confidence is the ultimate determinant of success. We see and hear this all the time in sports, but when it comes to business leaders, it does not appear to ring true. Yet our experience in working with business leaders has shown us that confidence can very much be an issue. Confidence comes from within. No one can give it to you. It reflects how we view ourselves and our preparation for future challenges.

We become what we think about most. People carry around images of themselves – of who they are and how they perform. These “pictures” begin at birth and continue throughout the life cycle, capturing all of our experiences. These experiences reflect both the successes and failures and the manner in which they are interpreted and stored. Much of this self-image is driven by our thoughts (positive and negative) and maintained and reinforced by our self-talk. Given the basic negativism surrounding our lives, being positive and having trust and confidence in one’s ability is really hard work.

Martin Seligman in his book, *Learned Optimism*, writes about the power of optimism over pessimism for being successful. He explains how we all develop an explanatory style as a way to explain the cause of events. Our styles say much about how we will react cognitively and emotionally in a given situation. The development of our styles comes directly from how we think and what we think about and from the repetitiveness of these patterns of thought over time and situations. Seligman has identified practical implications of his work that have been incorporated into our peak performance training. Leaders cannot rely on intuition about the optimism of their people. It needs to be measured in a way that they cannot, and Seligman's ASQ does exactly that.

We train people to shift from negative to positive patterns of thinking and to control self-talk. Recognizing that people need to take responsibility for their cognitions (thoughts), we provide training that helps them achieve that control. Based on Seligman's work and other recent scientific evidence based on how children learn language at home, positive-effective thinking can be systematically developed. The use of affirmations that the individual develops and recording them on an individualized CD applies the methodology derived from these research findings. It is an effective tool for transforming negative thoughts to positive ones and moving from a pessimistic to an optimistic mind set. Mastery of this competence can transform a person into an exceptional thinker.

Stress and Energy Management: Thriving Under Pressure. Stress and energy go together. Anyone can perform well when everything is going just right. But what about when conditions are unfavorable, when things are going against you, when the pressure is on, when things are not going according to plan? Who really delivers then? There are performers who actually thrive under these conditions. They welcome the pressure. It drives them. It gives them energy and desire coupled with the ultimate satisfaction of having overcome all odds while doing something exceptional. These are your peak performers. The debilitating effects of stress on the individual and the organization have been well documented in recent years. There is little debate, for example, that for business organizations, stress is a major factor that reveals itself as diminished performance and increased health care costs.

One of the major stressors in business is relentless pressure to deliver results through higher and higher levels of performance and ever increasing productivity. Many companies offer stress management seminars in hopes of raising awareness about the effects of stress and providing simple coping mechanisms. However, research on high performance in sports and the military has shown that the ability to handle oneself in high pressure and demand situations is less about the stressors and more about the individual's response to them. The solution lies in a more systematic and integrated approach to providing the necessary tools for actually thriving under pressure, not just surviving. We couple traditional stress management techniques with innovative uses of the most recent sensory feedback technologies to develop the ability to manage stress and energy levels. We agree with John Eliot who points out in his book, *Overachievement*, that exceptional performances are not about being relaxed. They are about being energized and excited and impassioned, but always very much in control. Understanding how stress works from a neurophysiological perspective, having means at your disposal for altering its effects, and receiving quality hi-tech feedback on how you are doing are powerful tools for learning how to thrive in pressure situations and for living your life.

Attention Control: Concentration amidst Distractions. In their insightful book, *The Attention Economy*, Thomas Davenport and John Beck discuss how in today's attention economy "the new scarcest resource isn't ideas or talent, but attention itself." The demand for our attention in modern society is unparalleled in both scope and intensity.

Yet the way in which we attend has not significantly changed over time. We still primarily learn to attend to the right things at the right time through trial-and-error and, if fortunate, through good coaching by parents, teachers, coaches, etc. Through this method, we learn what is useful for our attention and what is not as we encounter new situations. However, given today's stimulus rich environment, all competing for our attention, this is not the most efficient and effective way to learn to attend. The resultant attention deficit threatens to seriously cripple the workplace. In fact, a new term has been coined by the authors of *The Attention Economy: Organizational ADD*, a condition wherein there is "an increased likelihood for missing key information when making decisions, diminished time for reflection..., difficulty holding others' attention..., and decreased ability to focus when necessary." (Davenport & Beck, p. 7.)

We have provided business leaders and others a more innovative and scientific approach to addressing this attention challenge. Our attention control training combines a simple but robust framework for understanding how attention works, a means for navigating that framework, and new brain wave (EEG) technology that provides accurate feedback about how one is paying attention – the key to improving focus and concentration directly.

Visualization: What You See Is What You Get. Achieving a really challenging goal is to see it already accomplished. Imagery, commonly referred to as visualization, is a powerful tool for doing exactly that. It involves using all the senses to create or recreate an experience in the mind. Everyone has an inherent capability but how well it is developed is a function of their developmental experiences. We all use imagery in one form or another all the time. We differ, however, in its sophistication and effectiveness. Some visualize very effectively with no formal training while most do so only after systematic training and practice of the skill. The neurological wiring, however, is in for everyone. How well we do it is a function of our developmental experiences. The early and consistent use of imagination in play and work helps build the brain "muscles" for visualizing. Imagery maximizes potential for performance by helping to develop greater confidence, energy, concentration, and feelings of success.

In our 5-Point Peak Performance Model, visualization and imagery are developed as a specific peak performance competency as well as an integrating mechanism. The first step is assessing how well an individual's visualization skill has developed. We have discovered through biofeedback and neurofeedback instrumentation that high quality visualization is characterized by a deep physiological and mental coherence coupled with an optimal level of alertness and concentration. The power of imagery comes from the confidence gained by seeing and feeling successful performance in the mind before it actually happens. The common description of this experience is "I have been here before".

Reaching Your Apex: Learn to Achieve Peak Performance

Achieving sustained high performance in today's competitive and pressure filled business environment, influenced heavily by organizational and workplace structures, policies and processes, can be a very daunting task. Traditional emphases on organizational and workplace solutions for meeting the challenges have not produced the desired results in performance improvement and productivity increases. These methods have typically focused on the more peripheral issues and have not addressed the heart of the challenge, which is how to fundamentally change the manner by which people approach their own performance and tap into their full potential. Non-business organizations have experienced significant success in applying peak performance techniques to enhancing performance.

The military especially has demonstrated the effectiveness of such programs via the US Military Academy's Center for Enhanced Performance. Elite athletes, of course, have demonstrated for decades the relationship between their success or failure and their mental training and preparation. The APEX Peak Performance Center has combined the best results from the military, athletic and business experiences in producing a state-of-the-art Center and training program.

The time has come for business professionals to think as peak performers and the special preparation that takes, for they too are expected to be elite performers. Sustaining exceptional performance levels can only be accomplished through deliberate and systematic training in those peak performance competencies that most directly impact what we think, say, and do in ways that unleash our capabilities and full potential in any performance situation. It requires the honesty to admit that we do not know everything coupled with a willingness to learn and change. **If you do what you have always done, you will get what you have always gotten!**

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Louis S. Csoka

PhD, Partner

Apex Performance, Inc.

Louis S. Csoka, PhD, is a founding partner of Apex Performance. He has designed, developed, and implemented Leadership Development programs with primary focus on sustained peak performance. He has successfully delivered targeted results as a performance consultant with various organizations across a multitude of disciplines and industries to achieve extraordinary results.

Professional Accomplishments

At West Point, Colonel (retired) Csoka created, developed, and directed the U.S. Military Academy's first-ever Performance Enhancement Center. The center provides education and training in mental skills essential for enhancing performance. It received international recognition and has been highlighted on ESPN, ABC, NBC, CBS and PBS. More recently, Dr. Csoka has created the first ever Peak Performance Center in a Fortune 500 company. The adaptation of performance enhancement principles from the West Point experience has proven to be a successful leader development tool for business executives.

As SVP for Human Resources in a \$6 billion global manufacturing company, Dr. Csoka led the transformation of the company's human resources function. This involved reengineering the HR organization, recruiting and training new human resources talent, and aligning HR practices with business needs. Under his leadership, the human resources organization led the company in creating a team-based organization and designing its first leader development program.

Serving as Director of Research at The Conference Board, Dr. Csoka led the reorganization and transformation of the Human Resources and Organizational Effectiveness research cell, resulting in world-class reports on key human resources issues and best practices. In this role, he also facilitated senior human resources executive councils of Fortune 1000 companies in their periodic meetings to discuss and find solutions to challenging issues.

Colonel (retired) Louis Csoka served for 21 years on the West Point faculty in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership. As Professor of Psychology & Leadership and part of the first leadership team of this newly formed department, he played a major role in the design of the organization and its curriculum, course development, and faculty selection and development. In addition to teaching, he published extensively in professional journals, made over 50 presentations at conferences, and served as an internal leadership and organizational development consultant to the U.S. Army.

Colonel (retired) Csoka served with distinction as an Army officer and unit leader in Germany, Holland, Korea, and Vietnam. He retired from the US Army in 1993.

Education and Professional Organizations

Dr. Csoka is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and holds an M.S. and Ph.D. from the University of Washington. He is a member of the American Psychological Association, American Society for Training & Development, International Society for Performance Improvement and the Association for the Advancement of Applied Sport Psychology.

ABOUT APEX PERFORMANCE

Be the Leader You Need to Be

The APEX experience delivers results on the core of leadership – self awareness, confidence, mental agility and composure. APEX Performance provides individual and team training to leaders and professionals in all fields. The program enhances performance through a unique combination of personalized training, follow up coaching and advanced technology which quantifies and measures a person’s growth and improvement.

The APEX training helps leaders develop themselves and other leaders. It improves results by impacting leadership, decision making, negotiating, selling and personal interactions. The ultimate in self awareness – a one of a kind scientific approach for enhancing performance that trains and measures improvement of “inner” competencies that separate good performers from great performers!

Organizations depend on consistent high performance from their people. They depend on this regardless of the constant pressures and demands, the ever-changing business environment and global competition. APEX Performance has identified the peak performance competencies that lead to resilience and perseverance. The systematic development of these competencies leads to an extraordinary level of personal control and the following benefits.

The Benefits

- Enhanced leadership performance
- Thriving under pressure and change
- Better decision making
- Innovative and adaptive thinking
- Enhanced personal interactions
- Improved selling and negotiating
- Team cohesiveness and improved culture

What is so different about the APEX Performance approach?

- Systematic approach to defining, developing and measuring inner competencies
- Integrated approach using technology to provide the ultimate in self awareness
- Measurable results – see improvement through the use of advanced feedback technology
- Personalized approach –a personal plan to reach your specific goals
- Follow up tools and coaching –the attainment of self mastery is a continual process

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