

Performance Enhancement The Mental Edge for Leadership

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It was another hot day for the soldiers in 3d Platoon, Echo Company. Tensions were high within the platoon as the desert heat and lack of rest caused difficulties. Gunnery skills had declined in this antitank unit due to the difficult environment and the growing fear of the unknown aspects of combat. Fortunately, the platoon leader had been sufficiently trained in performance enhancement techniques prior to his unit's deployment to the Gulf region. The lieutenant was able to use his training to focus his platoon and establish clear goals that directed the stress in a positive manner. Focus and concentration skills improved noticeably and the platoon performed superbly when actually in combat for the first time.

PERFORMANCE enhancement techniques enable individuals to perform their best in all situations. A similar situation to the one cited above occurred during Operation *Desert Storm*, and the performance enhancement training given to the young platoon leader was key to the unit's success. The training provided to the platoon leader and to other individual leaders was conducted by the Performance Enhancement Center (PEC) at the US Military Academy (USMA), at West Point. The PEC is a program dedicated to the improvement of human performance. The center uses techniques considered pioneering in the field of human performance and developed a first-rate training program; one that has received national recognition.

Performance enhancement is an education and training program derived from psychology

and the sport sciences. "It focuses on providing individuals with the mental and psychological skills necessary to perform at peak levels under pressure and stress."¹ Unlike some mental training programs, performance enhancement provides clear guidance for individuals at all levels to improve their performance.

This article provides a simple guide that will enable individuals to improve their performance if they are willing to provide the effort. Leaders can strive to reach their full potential if they are willing to follow these performance enhancement techniques. Additionally, these methods should stimulate new thoughts and ideas for leaders to use in training their soldiers to perform their best. The techniques have been successful for a multitude of individuals, including soldiers, leaders and world-class athletes. Proper goal setting will be discussed, as well as how to develop and use vision as a leader. The article will also discuss the relationship between performance, positive thinking, concentration skills and stress management. Performance enhancement skills are no substitute for hard work, but when used together with hard work, they will enable individuals to reach their full potential as leaders.

Goal Setting

Goal setting is important because it provides individuals with direction and intensity for their actions. Successful people set goals for themselves so that they have a clear focus of where they want to go and how they will get there. The problem with goals is that too often people rely only on outcome goals to provide their motiva-

“Key to all that must be accomplished is a vision.”

—US Army Field Manual (FM) 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels*

tion and direction. Outcome goals focus on the outcome of an event and can cause a person to be dependent on results only. Too often, these results are not available directly and do not provide enough feedback to individuals to keep them motivated to improve. Outcome goals are long-term goals that are certainly useful for improvement over an extended amount of time; however, more specific goals are needed for short-term improvement that will ultimately enable individuals to reach their full potential.

To substantially improve your performance as a leader, you must learn to develop performance goals. Performance goals are specific actions to be achieved and are not usually dependent on the actions of others. The successful completion of your performance goals should lead you to the overall outcome goal for which you strive. Set tough, but attainable goals that are realistic enough to challenge you and are specific in design. Set goals for the training periods leading up to major exercises, as well as for the major exercise. For example, have performance goals for local training activities that relate to your outcome goal to perform effectively at the National Training Center (NTC), Fort Irwin, California. This will ensure that you maintain your direction and intensity leading up to the major event.

A guide to individual goal setting:

- Take the time to set goals.
- Set challenging but realistic goals.
- Set specific, not general goals.
- Set goals for the train-up to a major event.
- Set positive goals as opposed to negative goals.
- Relate individual goals to the unit goals.

Visualization

Visualization is a powerful tool that can increase a person's performance. It involves "using all the senses to recreate or create an experi-

ence in the mind."² Everyone has a different ability to visualize. Some people visualize very effectively with no formal training, and others have a difficult time even with the help of training. One of the most rudimentary visualization techniques that is used most often is daydreaming. Whether it is understood or not, most people use visualization in one form or another. It is merely a matter of recognizing it and practicing the proper techniques. If visualization is understood by an individual, the options are virtually limitless to the extent to which it can be used to improve performance.

Practicing complex skills: By practicing and increasing one's ability to use visualization, complex skills can become easier to accomplish using less training time. For example, tank gunnery skills could be mentally rehearsed prior to conducting tank gunnery in order to increase performances. Complex tasks such as piloting a helicopter can be visualized to improve response times.

Applying the lessons of history: Studying past battles can become a very valuable tool when combining the study with visualization for the application of these lessons in the future. As B. H. Liddell Hart stated, "The practical value of history is to throw the film of the past through the material projector of the present onto the screen of the future."³

Practicing leadership skills: Visualization is a powerful tool to assist in the practicing of many skills used in leadership. For example, General George S. Patton Jr. frequently mentally rehearsed his speeches and had a clear vision of himself as a true warrior. Napoleon also understood the value of visualization as he stated, "If I always appear prepared, it is because before entering on an undertaking, I have meditated for long and have foreseen what may occur. It is not genius which reveals to me suddenly and secretly what I should do in circumstances unexpected by

“A person who doubts himself is like a man who would enlist in the ranks of his enemies and would bear arms against himself. He makes his failure certain by himself being the first person convinced of it.”

—Alexandre Dumas

others; it is thought and meditation.”⁴

Managing stress: Proper visualization can affect how an individual handles stressful situations. By visualizing, an individual can get the feeling that he or she can accomplish a stressful task as they have done it before. Evidence has led scientists to believe that visualization can affect such physiological responses as heart rate, respiration and blood pressure.⁵

Developing junior leaders' vision: FM 22-103 clearly emphasizes senior leaders having the ability to develop a vision for an organization. “Vision is the hub or core from which flows the leadership and command force that fires imaginations, sustaining the will to win.”⁶ This vision, which is so essential for senior leaders, must also be developed in the junior leaders to allow the organization to be successful. The junior leaders must cultivate their ability to see beyond the obvious by learning to visualize early in their careers. This will ensure the full development of senior leaders who have a vision that can be the foundation for the entire organization.

Tips for successful visualization:

- Be relaxed yet attentive.
- Begin with simple images, and build as you become better.
- Create vivid images; use as many senses as possible.
- Control the images—manipulate the images. Stop and go at will—fast, slow and real time.
- See future success in the present state.

Case Study

The PEC at USMA was requested to provide training on performance enhancement techniques to the Army parachute team, the Golden Knights. Valuable lessons were learned during this unique opportunity that can benefit any in-

dividual attempting to improve performance. The first lesson involves the true value of setting proper goals. The Golden Knights are world-class athletes with both competitive individual team members and teams that have won numerous world championships. However, despite their total dedication and extreme commitment to their sport, some of them needed extensive help on proper goal setting. Most of them had goals that were oriented only on the outcome of winning a world championship. Their performance goals had not been developed; therefore, they were not as successful in achieving their outcome goal. Once they understood the difference, they were able to develop performance goals that were very specific. The result was an increase in performance during training and thus substantial overall improvement.

Another area of interest to the aspiring leaders is the way that the Golden Knights use visualization prior to every parachute jump. They mentally rehearse each jump as a team and as individuals to improve their performance and allow them to relax and concentrate. This illustrates yet another case of successful individuals who know the value of visualizing their performance. Whether jumping out of airplanes or seeing the battlefield as a leader, the use of visualization can assist you.

Positive Attitude

Attitudes are habits of mind. They are based on previous experience and serve a useful purpose as good starting points. However, they can create serious problems when you begin to let attitudes take charge rather than guide you—especially negative ones. Our behaviors and our performance are shaped by how and what we think of ourselves. If we think we can do something, we usually can. The significance of this

“Genius is the ability to reduce the complicated to the simple.”

—C. W. Ceran

principle is that we can directly and indirectly influence our performance by directing our thoughts through conscious effort. For better or for worse, we do become what we think. If you think about being a failure long enough, you become one. High-level performers have long learned the necessity of being positive. They have not inherited positive attitudes or beliefs in themselves, but have learned, consciously and with full awareness, to train themselves to have positive self-thoughts that guide their actions and performance.

Techniques for Building a Positive Attitude.

- **Thought Stopping.** The ability to switch from negative to positive thoughts is critical to having a positive attitude. Thought stopping involves concentrating on the undesired thought briefly and then suddenly stopping that thought, clearing your mind and replacing it with a desired, positive thought. This technique has proved to be very effective for people who dwell on their own mistakes. With the motivation and commitment to change, you can stop a negative thought and replace it with a positive one and be on the way to a more productive attitude.

- **Positive Self-talk.** A technique that can be used with thought stopping is positive self-talk. Once you have stopped the negative thoughts, you need to replace them immediately with positive thoughts that dwell on the positive aspects of a situation. Since we all “talk to ourselves” constantly, learning to engage in a conversation of your choice can be a major step toward allowing yourself to perform to your full potential. To begin this process, you might try listing the negative thoughts that you experienced during a recent stressful event. Next, list the positive thoughts you should have had during this same event. This comparison will provide a good starting point to help you understand how to change. Now you just need to work at it through daily, repetitious practice.

Focus and Concentration

Superior performance occurs when individuals are able to focus and concentrate totally on the task at hand. Generally, we are capable of moving from a narrow focus, such as reading this article, to a broader focus, such as driving a car.⁷ The ability to control this shift from a narrow focus to a broad focus has some important bearing on our ability to perform effectively in critical situations, whether flying a helicopter, leading a platoon or making critical decisions at a higher level.

Another important dimension of focus is its direction. At any moment your attention is directed to either external or internal stimuli. When the focus of your attention is directed internally, you are involved in your own thoughts, ideas and feelings; whereas when you are externally focused, you attend to objects and events that are outside your own body (your environment).⁸ Most complex situations require that we shift our focus from internal to external very quickly. For example, a platoon leader develops an internal focus in order to decide how to defend a battle position, then shifts to an external focus (the enemy) in order to react to the situation.

The problems that occur with focusing skills tend to be most significant when an individual is placed under pressure or stress. As the pressure or stress increases, there is an initial tendency for people to rely too heavily on the most highly developed attentional ability. For example, instinctive individuals have a tendency to react too quickly. Under pressure, they may fail to analyze and plan when needed. They lose their capacity to make adjustments, getting flustered by the same thing, time and time again, not learning from their mistakes.⁹ If the stress in a situation is significant enough, an individual may become extremely narrow in his or her focus and make mistakes based on the inability to analyze a situation properly. Concentration is

“All men are frightened. The more intelligent they are, the more they are frightened. The courageous man is the man who forces himself, in spite of his fear, to carry on.”

—General George S. Patton, Jr.

the ability to sustain focus on selected stimuli for a period of time.

Tips on Focus and Concentration

Proper focus and concentration requires “stilling” or “parking” the mind on present tasks. When the mind drifts into the past or the future, we are not as effective in our present performance. This can be practiced by seeing how long you can focus on a single thought and bringing your focus under control when you begin to wander. Do not concentrate on concentrating; you must be able to focus your attention on the task at hand and not on your ability to concentrate.

Ensure that you use rehearsals of simulated experiences. These experiences allow the individual to become so familiar with the stimuli associated with the actual situation that they are no longer distracting. For example, an antitank gunner who practices with loud noise distractions will be better prepared for an upcoming battle.

Use attentional cues and triggers to return to the proper focus. For example, a pilot quietly tells himself or herself to relax and keeps his or her eyes on the instruments in order to prepare to land safely in a critical situation.

Stress Management

The ability to perform under pressure is certainly critical for leaders at all levels. Effective leaders learn how to manage their stress and use stress to enhance their performance. “Stress is the body’s response to a demand placed on it. The demands may be physical (cold, injury, disease) or mental (fear, conflict, pressure).”¹⁰ The ability to perform with the optimal level of stress is often termed the “flow state.” In this state, perceived demand or challenge of a situation is in balance with perceived capability or skill level. Leaders must be able to understand what the proper level of stress is for them, as stress levels are different for each individual. In order to reach

the “flow state,” an individual must be able to control regulate his stress level when it becomes too high or sometimes even too low. This manipulation of the stress level can only occur with extensive practice and effort. Leaders who feel that they can “tough it out” and perform no matter what the stress level, are in for a surprise.

Tips on stress management:

- Focus attention on the activity itself.
- Focus only on the present.
- Stay relaxed physically and alert mentally.

Learning simple relaxation techniques can prove to be very effective for leaders. Leaders are expected to remain calm and set the example for their soldiers, and relaxation techniques can help you do this effectively. There are a number of relaxation techniques available; one of the most effective for leaders is the breathing relaxation technique.

- Develop routines in preparing for stressful situations.
- Use visualization to reexperience previous flow states.
- Apply the thought-stopping technique that was discussed earlier.
- Apply the rational thinking technique to reduce the stress level. This technique involves talking yourself out of negative thoughts. For example, an individual experiencing the stress of jumping out of an airplane for the first time might tell himself, “I am well trained and lots of others before me have done this—so can I.”

The PEC conducted a research project at the NTC that provides some excellent lessons for leaders seeking to improve performance. The research was designed to test the effects of performance enhancement training on Bradley Fighting Vehicle gunnery skills. The research was obtained by using randomly selected Bradley crews from the opposing force’s (OPFOR’s) infantry battalion. Key points from the research includes:

*"I find the great thing in this world is not so much where we stand,
as in what direction we are moving."*

—Oliver Wendell Holmes

the establishment of specific goals for the crews, the use of battle sound and gunnery techniques cassette tapes to enhance visualization, teaching simple relaxation techniques and teaching simple focus and concentration skills. Crews were tested on the Bradley unit conduct of fire trainer and, in each case, the crews trained in performance enhancement techniques performed better than those without the training.

This research project is another example of how effective the performance enhancement techniques discussed in this article can be. This was certainly a limited research project; however, it shows that individuals can improve certain mental skills if they have the proper training and motivation. The OPFOR soldiers were able to improve their gunnery skills without ever firing a round or even getting in a vehicle. They learned to handle stress and even improved their focus and concentration skills in a limited amount of time. If leaders are given an understanding of some basic performance enhancement techniques, then training and performance could be improved across the Army.

Performance enhancement techniques offer a powerful way to enhance individual perform-

ance. Some of the techniques discussed are in use by many leaders today and are critical to their success. Other techniques are on the cutting edge of technology and are extremely complex in nature. Regardless of the type of enhancement method, it is critical that leaders at all levels actively search for new ways to improve human performance. The technological advances of our time demand that we continue to improve human performance. Performance enhancement techniques are a tool for the prudent leader to use to challenge those soldiers under them to reach their full potential. These techniques do not present a "quick fix" for improvement, rather, they offer solid methods for individuals to improve if they are willing to provide a valid effort. In addition, they challenge all leaders to ensure that they are fully mentally prepared to lead the high-quality soldiers in today's Army. We challenge every leader to follow the advice of Patton when he stated, "Accept the challenges so that you may feel the exhilaration of victory."¹¹ Performance enhancement techniques provide the additional skills needed to accept the challenges of leadership. They are a combat multiplier of the future. **MR**

NOTES

1. COL Louis S. Csoka, "Performance Enhancement: The Future Now," *Assembly* (November 1990):33.
2. *Applied Sports Psychology: Personal Growth to Peak Performance*, ed. J.M. Williams (Mayfield View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1986), 219.
3. US Army Field Manual (FM) 22-100, *Military Leadership* (Washington, DC, July 1990), 9.
4. FM 22-103, *Leadership and Command at Senior Levels* (Washington, DC, June 1987), 59.

5. Williams, 210.
6. FM 22-103, 5.
7. R.M. Nideffer, *The Inner Athlete: Mind Plus Muscle for Winning*, Enhanced Performance Associates, 1976.
8. *Ibid.*, adapted for leadership.
9. *Ibid.*, adapted for leadership.
10. FM 22-100, 58.
11. George S. Patton, Jr., *War As I Knew It* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1947).

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