

THE INNER GAME OF LEADERSHIP: Peak Performance for Business Leaders



By Louis S. Csoka

Some say the first challenge of leadership is to know whom you lead. I say the first challenge of leadership is to know who you are.

When freshmen, or "plebes," enter the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, they encounter a high stress environment. The aim is not simply to harass or haze them. Rather, the challenging environment pushes the aspiring officers to discover who they are. The U.S. Army teaches that you cannot successfully lead others until you have learned to lead yourself. The inner game of leadership means exercising inner control over what you think, say and do, and when achieved, reaching peak leadership performance is more likely.

Elite athletes who compete against one another are often not all that different in physical abilities. Yet some consistently dominate others, and the difference can frequently be traced to their exceptional mental preparedness. Peak performance for athletes depends on having control over one's emotional and physiological states, and much the same is true for business leaders. They face relentless pressure to out-perform their competitors even as technologies and rules of competition are changing, and mental discipline can often spell the difference.

Business leaders tend to adapt and adjust to these demanding conditions as best they can, but they can also usefully prepare for them. A systematic approach to training in peak performance skills has been developed for athletes and military professionals and, more recently, business leaders. First created at West Point by the author and now developed for business leaders, the program includes intensive training in goal setting, positive thinking, stress management, attention control, and visualization and imagery:

Setting the Target -- Eyes On the Prize: The Cheshire cat in Wonderland said to Alice "if you don't know where you're going, any path will do," and Oliver Wendell Holmes once remarked, "The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we are, but in what direction we are moving." A journey starts with explicitly appreciating where you want to end up. Embracing and living your mission provide the essential foundation for persevering when challenges and roadblocks get in the way.

Positive Thinking -- We Become What We Think About Most: People carry around images of themselves of who they are and how they perform. These pictures incorporate both our successes and failures and our interpretation of what caused them. Sometimes the memories of failures can overwhelm the images of successes, and it is essential to foster a positive mind set to build confidence in one's own ability to set and reach leadership goals.

Stress Management -- Thriving Under Pressure: Most people can perform reasonably well when all is going well, but some do far less well when conditions become less

favorable. Personal stress on some results in diminished performance and even weakened health. Elite athletes and military professionals have shown that the ability to handle themselves in a highly stressful situation depends upon systematic training in stress management before entering the situation.

Attention Control -- Concentration Amidst Distractions: Thomas Davenport and John Beck have noted in *The Attention Economy* that "the new scarcest resource isn't ideas or talent, but attention itself." While attention demands have escalated in recent years, the way that we tend to respond has changed little. We still learn primarily through trial-and-error experience, but explicit training methods from sports psychology and other areas can be combined to train attention control by emphasizing the methods of attention rather than the targets of attention.

Visualization and Imagery -- What You See Is What You Get: A key device for achieving a goal is to image it achieved. By visualizing the end state, one develops greater energy, concentration, and confidence for reaching the end state, and this capacity too can be developed through systematic training.

To achieve maximum effectiveness and lasting impact, the approach must be integrated, measurable and personalized. Integrated: The five skills are taught separately yet exercised together. Measurable: Trainers use feedback technologies to measure individual progress. Personalized: The program is customized around the client's goals and strengths.

Note: Retired Army Colonel Louis Csoka served for 21 years on the West Point faculty in the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership. He is president and founder of APEX Performance (www.apexperform.com), a Charlotte, N.C.,-based company providing performance enhancing training for executives, athletes and military personnel. Csoka can be reached at lcsoka@apexperform.com.