



KEEP YOUR HEAD IN THE GAME

By Monique Verduyn

What does sports psychology have to do with running a successful business?

The mind is a powerful tool

Create a mental picture of yourself achieving greatness, hold onto it, and chances are you will. We can optimise our performance in life and at work by setting goals, remaining focused and visualising where we want to be and how to get there. However, much of what people think can be negative and harmful, causing an enormous waste of energy and preventing us from being our best.

Judith Beck, director of the Beck Institute for Cognitive Therapy and Research in the US, says it's been proven that "thoughts influence moods." Over time, the power of negative thinking can lead a person to believe that they always fail. What Beck calls realistic thinking, is equally powerful. It involves recognising and correcting negative automatic thoughts. If that's not enough to convince you, according to a 2009 Stanford Research Institute study, success is 88% attitude. US author and business coach Jim Rohn says, "When you start thinking and saying what you really want then your mind automatically shifts and pulls you in that direction. And sometimes it can be that simple, just a little twist in vocabulary that illustrates your attitude and philosophy." That's where sports psychology comes in.

What is sports psychology?

As a discipline, sports psychology studies the psychological factors that affect participation and performance in sports, and seeks to apply these to enhance individual and team performance by managing emotions and minimising the negative psychological effects of poor performance.

"Sports psychology encourages people to think about what they want to do and not what they want to avoid," says clinical psychologist and performance specialist Kirsten van Heerden. "The focus is on movement towards rather than away from something. I talk about performance psychology. It's about helping people to perform their best under any circumstances, and to perform consistently well."

She says the mental skills and psychological factors needed to become an Olympic athlete are the same as what's required in any rigorous performance environment. "Whether you are giving a business presentation, dealing with the stresses of being a boss, writing an exam, speaking in public, or attempting to close a deal, without the required skills, you will most likely not be able to reach your potential."

Where sport and business meet

The intersection of sports psychology and business happens with mental skills training that includes concentration and focus, goal setting, handling pressure and stress management, controlling anxiety and being able to relax, visualisation, self talk and cognitive control.

“It’s not just about winning,” cautions Van Heerden. “It’s about acquiring the mental skills that will enable you to always perform at your peak. Psychologists have identified these skills as the mental links to excellence, regardless of whether they are applied in business, sports, the arts, or any other environment that requires the individual to be focused.”

Performance under pressure and the ability to deliver are critical, and can be hampered by negative self talk, or the inability to concentrate, for example. On the day of that big presentation, you have to control your nerves and your thoughts to deliver the message properly. Applying principles of sports psychology can help you achieve that.

Setting goals

Van Heerden says that goal setting is such a hackneyed phrase that many people find the idea quite tedious, but it’s a foundational mental skill. Without mapping your route, and monitoring and evaluating your progress, development and advancement become impossible.

“Daily, weekly, short-term and long-term goals are essential,” she says. “And once those are set, it’s best to work backwards, and to begin with a daily routine. Studies have shown that what distinguishes Olympic athletes from others is that they set process goals and decide ‘what do I want to accomplish today?’ Successful business people often do exactly that. The result is that each day has an outcome.” She stresses that smart goals are specific, measurable, action oriented, realistic and time oriented. Avoid statements like, “I want to be a better business person”; rather focus on definable measurable outcomes like, “I want to complete a short course in financial management.”

Being in flow

It’s also important to establish a balance between your dreams and what you can achieve realistically. When we set goals that are too difficult, we become anxious and often incapable of achieving them; by the same token, set an objective that is really easy, and chances are you won’t be motivated to get it done. “It’s what we call being in flow,” she explains. “It’s the optimal state that lies on the boundary between boredom and anxiety.”

The concept of flow, applied in a variety of fields, is also referred to as being in the moment, on the ball, or in the zone. It was conceived by Hungarian psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi and describes a mental state in which the person performing an activity is fully immersed in a feeling of energised focus, involvement, and success in the process of the activity.

According to Csíkszentmihályi, flow is completely focused motivation. It is a single-minded immersion and represents the ultimate in harnessing the emotions in the service of performing and learning. In flow, the emotions are not just contained and channelled, but positive, energised, and aligned with the task at hand. To be caught in the ennui of depression or the agitation of anxiety is to be barred from flow. The hallmark of flow is a feeling of spontaneous joy, even rapture, while performing a task.

“When you are in flow, time stands still,” says Van Heerden. “There’s a very relaxed kind of concentration that happens. It’s like being at a dinner party and suddenly realising that it’s 2.00am. All other distractions have receded into the background because you are having a great time. It’s that kind of focused concentration on the task at hand that results in optimal experience and a sense of pure enjoyment.”

In their book *In The Zone With South Africa's Sports Heroes*, authors Michael Cooper and Tim Goodenough interviewed champion swimmer Natalie du Toit. The first time she remembered being in the zone, she was 14 and had to win her race to qualify. She not only won, but also cut two seconds off the Africa record. She recalled feeling little pressure and having a nothing-to-lose attitude during the race itself. To this day, Du Toit believes that she alone is responsible for her performance and pulls herself out of negative thinking quickly when she performs poorly.

What do you see before you?

Many elite athletes use visualisation techniques as part of their training and preparation for competitions. There are stories of athletes who've used these techniques to cultivate not only a competitive edge, but also to create renewed mental awareness, a heightened sense of wellbeing and confidence. All of these have been shown to contribute to success. Van Heerden recounts the story of Argentinean football legend Maradona, who would sit in the change room with a towel over his head for at least five minutes before each game. Someone asked him why and he said that he used the time to think about all the best goals he had scored so that he could remember how he did it. "What's important is that it's not just about visualising the outcome. That can be highly stress inducing. It's better to visualise the process of getting there. Picture the place where you love to be, where you are calm and relaxed. The trick is to create a real image in your head which can only be done when you involve all the senses. If you are on the beach, you need to smell the sea, hear the waves crashing on the shore and feel the sand between your toes. It's a skill also referred to as 'feelisation', which involves all the senses in a more intense experience than visualisation alone."

Relaxation plays a vital role in this process. People have busy brains that need time out every now and then. To develop this skill, Van Heerden recommends practising complete physical relaxation by focusing on each part of the body individually. Combining visualisation and relaxation techniques can lead to the creation of coping imagery. "When you are prepping for an important meeting, for example, you can get ready for it by being there and visualising yourself as confident and articulate. Deliver a perfect presentation in your head, so that when you actually give it, it feels as though you have done it before."

Reframing your thoughts

Van Heerden advocates the application of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT), an approach that aims to teach a person new skills, behaviours and cognitions through a goal-oriented, systematic procedure. CBT is effective in addressing the way people see themselves. Sessions with clients are often practical with specific technique-driven, brief, direct, and time-limited treatments. It tends to focus on the 'here and now', and on alleviating symptoms like anxiety and negativity.

"It's difficult for people to control their thoughts and how they interpret situations," says Van Heerden. "We all have filters through which we view the world. Through CBT, we can recognise what those are and develop ways to think about things differently. It's an approach that acknowledges that not everything in life is fantastic, even though the self-help gurus may preach that. Emotional hype is very different to the true control that enables you to reframe your thoughts. Practical exercises are extremely useful. Think about when you were a child and you played that game where you spot all the red cars on the road – because your thinking is so focused and you are paying attention only to red cars, you suddenly see them everywhere. Of course, the white cars are still on the road, but they have receded into the background. That is how we approach negative things – they are still there, but we just choose to focus on something

else. It's about being able to identify what you can control and what you can't. Focus only on the controllables, because there is nothing you can do about things like the economy, the traffic, or the weather."

Cognitive control is much like a physical skill that has to be learnt, and Van Heerden recommends taking a practical approach. "Business people simply do not have the time to spend years in therapy," she says. "What I like about CBT is that you learn skills and are then given the opportunity to practice them. The process requires an average of eight sessions with a client, over a period of two months, after which they go out into the world and apply them. People appreciate that approach because it means that they do not become dependent on you. They can simply tell you what their fears and anxieties are and we can work together to overcome them. It's a collaborative effort."

10 Elements of Flow

Hungarian psychologist, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi identifies the following ten factors as part of the experience of flow:

- Clear goals (expectations and rules are discernible and goals are attainable and align appropriately with one's skill set and abilities). Moreover, the challenge level and skill level should both be high.
- Concentrating, a high degree of concentration on a limited field of attention (a person engaged in the activity will have the opportunity to focus and to delve deeply into it).
- A loss of the feeling of self-consciousness, the merging of action and awareness.
- Distorted sense of time, one's subjective experience of time is altered.
- Direct and immediate feedback (successes and failures in the course of the activity are apparent, so that behaviour can be adjusted as needed).
- Balance between ability level and challenge (the activity is neither too easy nor too difficult).
- A sense of personal control over the situation or activity.
- The activity is intrinsically rewarding, so there is an effortlessness of action.
- A lack of awareness of bodily needs (to the extent that one can reach a point of real hunger or fatigue without realising it).
- Action awareness merging. People become absorbed in their activity, and focus of awareness is narrowed down to the activity itself.

Copyright is owned by Entrepreneur Media SA and/or Entrepreneur Media Inc