

Get in the Zone with Mental Performance Coaching

In 2009, CEO Henry Demone was at the helm of Canadian seafood company High Liner Foods when it acquired the U.S. and Asian assets for the Icelandic Seafood Corp.

When High Liner Foods was seeking acquisitions, Iceland was preparing to sell-off Icelandic Seafood to a German company. However, the Icelandic investment fund pre-empted any public bidding process, so the division was effectively not for sale.

Demone read the situation differently. In a daring move, he hired an Icelandic public relations firm to launch a campaign challenging the iconic national brand's no-bid sale. He brought the story to the public in a way that raised patriotic sentiment in Iceland.

He also flew to Iceland and met personally with all of the independent producers who supplied Icelandic Seafood and depended on the company for sales and marketing services. This prompted the investment fund to open the bidding process and subsequently High Liner Foods won the bid. The company's share price has quadrupled since 2009.

Demone's conquest is an example of successful mental performance in which executives act within their ideal zone. A place where work is interesting, challenging and fun, like a sport. "These deals kind of take over your life, and it's for real. There are hundreds of millions of dollars involved," Demone said. "But I think of it as a game."

Prior to this acquisition, Demone wasn't sure he still wanted to be a chief executive officer. Having achieved a lot of success rising to CEO at an early age, Demone – like many executives in their 50s – needed to reconnect with his original passion for business. He said mental performance coaching invigorated him to pursue higher goals, rather than retire or embark on a different career.

Learning From the Athletic Experience

Mental performance coaching is based on the observable fact that athletes and corporate leaders have almost identical experiences under pressure. The ability to master hopes, fears, excitement and anticipation are equally teachable in both sports and business.

Similar to traditional executive coaching, mental performance coaching starts with interview-based 360 Mindset and self-reporting assessments such as the FIRO-B and the CPI 261. From sports psychology, executives sometimes benefit from The Attentional and Interpersonal Style assessment, which forecasts how people perform under pressure and predicts a person's tendency to make mistakes.

In mental performance coaching, the objective is to identify and understand that we each have an optimum mental zone with certain levels of stress and optimism. This is called the green zone. It's where an individual feels invigorated and intentional, rather than stressed and reactive.

"I describe it as relaxed, yet focused," said Alan Crain, senior vice president and chief legal and governance officer for oil field service company Baker Hughes Inc. "You're calm but enthusiastic, energized without being nervous. Everything is controlled, interesting and positive."

Mental performance coaching aims to enable the individual to create the green zone for his or her most important challenges, such as negotiations, confrontations and defining moments of leadership.

Reconnecting With Instinct

Demone's Icelandic Seafood acquisition was a result of thinking in the green zone — a mental performance moment that works for leaders in the office as well as athletes in the Olympics.

For instance, in the 2008 Paralympics in Beijing, world champion sailor Paul Tingley found himself struggling to stay in second place. With a Canadian gold medal on the line, he was tightening up and getting away from his natural, more open style. Through coaching, Tingley discovered that he thrives in come-from-behind situations. So between heats, his coach told him: "This is exactly where you want to be at this stage in the competition."

"My momentum at that point was not so good, but that conversation put me in the now," Tingley said. "It brought me back to all the exciting times I had getting up to that point. It reminds you why you enjoy it all and why you're there in the first place."

Athletes become bolder and trust their instincts when the pressure is on. They allow themselves to be open to alternative possibilities in the midst of a competitive situation. Tingley reconnected with his more intrepid instincts and finished with a gold medal.

There is also a red zone. It's a mental space affected by extreme pressure or stress that manifests in narrowed focus and strong physiological responses, such as flight or fight. Going to the red zone is useful in truly dangerous situations such as combat or rescue. Here, focus narrows on survival; but there are many blind spots that inhibit thinking, creativity and well-rounded performance.

Organizational psychologist Randall White has observed the problem of over relying on strengths under such conditions. "We tend to grasp onto what we think we do best in the red zone, trying too hard to do things in an even more extreme fashion," he said.

On the opposite side of the performance spectrum is the blue zone, where people tend to be disinterested, unconnected, distracted, disengaged, uncaring and unmotivated. Focus is diffused.

The blue zone occurs frequently in the workplace. For instance, it happens during meetings with senior executives who check out quickly if the group can't see things clearly. The blue zone also may appear after a series of wins or achievements.

"This occurs when just showing up is seen as a form of winning or when a team or executive begin to believe their own press, that they can do no wrong," White said. "When high-performing executives become overconfident or are relying too heavily on their strengths, it is in its own way, a form of derailment."

Business Has Always Been Physical

Crain's corporate legal work at Baker Hughes is intellectually demanding, but it's also very physical. He has to deal with multiple time zones and long days closing negotiations, which can take a toll on the body. Mental performance centers on the fact that the body was not created to simply carry around the brain. Rather, the brain is an organ integral to the rest the body.

Author John Coates wrote that people act more out of physical stimulus than they do out of intellect. In his book, "The Hour Between Dog and Wolf," Coates explains that the long-held notion of a rational mind reserved for analytical and creative work may be a myth.

Coates, an investment banker turned neuroscientist, details the ebb and flow of human hormones such as adrenaline, testosterone and cortisone for part of the answer. These hormones react to human experiences and can be key drivers in bull markets, bear markets, bubbles and crashes in stock exchanges.

Stockbrokers spend a lot of time in red zones that make them reactive and aggressive rather than thoughtful and strategic. Winning makes them overconfident, and losing brings on irrational risk avoidance as hormones override rationality.

Coaching mental performance is a process to make an executive aware of this physiological connection between mind and body. This helps the executive tune in to subtle and sometimes barely detectable behaviors and tendencies during periods of excitement, stress, fear and elation.

Sharing the Green Zone With a Team

Crain said for him and his legal department, improved self-awareness is one of the most valuable aspects of mental performance coaching. "And because my whole team has been through this, they know themselves better," he said. "This makes it easier to lead a team to perform collectively and stay in the green zone."

Crain said his team members also have become more aware of others and are able to become coaches themselves to get the best performance from co-workers. "I now know my team in a much more personal way, and they know me better. We compliment one another much more than we did before."

Tingley also has incorporated this approach with his crew. "I'm with a three-person team now, and we're learning each other and the personalities involved. Mental performance accelerates the development and gets us there quickly, when time is a factor."

Working from the green zone appears to enable better outcomes because people find themselves less stressed, more relaxed and, therefore, easier to get along with. Crain said while in the zone, people can be as tough as they want and not necessarily make enemies. "If somebody manages to stay in green for tough negotiations and walk away with a good solid deal and a partnership for a relationship, that value can go for years and generations."

When High Liner Foods challenged the Icelandic investment fund for not making its offer public, the deal could have gone badly and left both sides feeling bitter. But Demone crafted an offer that, although very competitive, also was the result of green-zone planning. Therefore, it was mutually beneficial to both parties.

In his book, Coates wrote in detail about work in a post-crash business environment, and one danger relevant to mental performance coaching is many leaders' tendency to become risk-averse.

Those leaders may stop looking for the next opportunity, particularly when they've been successful or when they're under pressure from various business constraints.

Executives find themselves in blue zones where they stop challenging themselves, and the passion that made them choose their roles in the first place is absent. Instead, they may focus on maintaining the status quo.

Being overly conservative can prevent someone from spotting opportunities or the next big trend. Using mental performance coaching to cultivate green-zone performance, on the other hand, can become a competitive advantage that can pull high performers out of slumps, and make them more willing to take calculated risks and become better leaders.