

Habits of Mind that Drive Performance

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Why do talented people fail? Sometimes it's because they've reached a level at which further talent development requires more than ability and hard work. It takes psychological preparedness, habits of mind that drive performance. Psychological preparedness for high achievement may be the single most neglected component of talent development even though teachers, coaches and parents agree that it is an essential and perhaps pivotal factor. A review of research across disciplines suggests that there are seven mental competencies that drive performance. They include:

- Tolerance for stress or anxiety
- Willingness to work at the edge of one's competence (risk taking)
- Goal setting
- Mental rehearsal
- Mood management
- A positive explanatory style, and
- An ability to resolve affiliation/achievement conflicts

These skills keep one's focus sharp, order attention, and sustain engagement in hard work. This article describes the seven skills and their relationship to high performance.

Future articles will explore each one in detail and discuss strategies for nurturing them in students.

An ability to manage stress and anxiety is the first mental skill necessary for developing talent. We know from considerable research as well as from personal experience that fear often gets in the way of higher achievement. The relationship between performance and anxiety is not easy to explain. There are many variations within and across individuals. We know that the relationship is not linear. Some people are very motivated by high levels of stress while others find it paralyzing. Fear causes some people to step back from success or to sabotage their efforts. For others, heightened levels of anxiety interfere with concentration or motor control. Some people have a very high tolerance for stress while others are negatively impacted by low levels. As competition intensifies and stakes rise, so does stress and anxiety. Those who have no strategies for keeping a lid on their anxiety will not be able to realize their full potential.

In some cases, failure to realize potential is associated with an inability to *take realistic risks*. The farther one moves along the trajectory of achievement, the more uncertain outcomes become, and the more important it becomes to work at the edge of one's competence. Yet, in some cases, the most capable students are the ones least willing to step out of their comfort zone. They don't want to risk failure. But it's impossible to go from good to great without taking realistic risks.

Understanding the relationship between risk taking and achievement, and evaluating one's willingness to work at the edge of competence are the starting points for increasing realistic risk taking. Additionally, learning simple strategies for managing

anxiety and setting specific goals for risk taking will keep students moving along the pathway of talent development.

Since we know that motivation and achievement are affected by *goal setting*, isn't it surprising that most of us do little more than give it lip service? There is a strong relationship between goals and achievement. Goals affect performance and motivation in three ways. They:

- Focus attention
- Influence persistence, and
- Energize people.

More difficult goals tend to increase persistence, provided that individuals have some control over the amount of time they have available to work, and high goals tend to lead to higher performance than low goals.

Goals that are not accepted by the learner will probably not influence performance positively and may influence it negatively. Goals are most effective when they're challenging but attainable. In some cases, simply assigning a challenging goal can raise self-efficacy because it communicates a confidence that the individual has the ability to accomplish the task.

Sports psychologist Terry Orlick points out that when your performance falls apart, it usually falls apart in your head first. *Mental rehearsal* means to practice in your head. Research on mental rehearsal draws three strong conclusions: a) mental rehearsal is better than no practice at all, b) mental rehearsal in combination with physical practice is

more effective than either in isolation, and c) mental rehearsal enhances cognitive tasks more than motor tasks. Mental rehearsal is especially effective at increasing confidence and enhancing self-control. The ability to see a desired performance in one's head improves achievement.

Why do some talented people persevere in the face of adversity while others give up easily? One factor is their *explanatory style*, or how they interpret their success and failure experiences. Individuals who blame themselves for their losses, who catastrophize setbacks, and who determine that the causes of disappointments are enduring are likely to achieve much less than people who attribute losses to external factors, who limit the effects of setbacks, and who see the causes of disappointments as temporary. Researchers agree that explanatory style can be shaped. It's possible to learn to be more optimistic, to bounce back better from failure experiences. Fortunately, several excellent resources are now available to help people learn how to become more positive in their explanatory style (e.g. Seligman, 1995).

The ability to consistently perform at high levels requires the ability to keep arousal within an optimal zone of functioning for the task. This is *mood management*. In the last twenty years, research on artists and the creative experience especially has pointed to the potential role that mood management may play in the development of talent. Mood directly impacts our attention and our ability to control our minds. It shapes our thoughts and our focus. Many elite performers are deliberate in their efforts to manage their mood or emotional arousal. They often adhere to a strict regimen of diet, exercise, rest and self-talk to keep themselves in their zones of optimal functioning.

Some creative achievers don't understand the creative process and fear that mood management will interfere with their ability to create. Worse are the high creatives who believe that mood extremes enhance their creative achievement and strive toward extremes through substance abuse or self-destructive lifestyles. The research indicates that achievement is generally enhanced when individuals are free from troubling mood states.

The final mental habit that drives performance is *the ability to resolve affiliation/achievement conflicts*. These conflicts arise for talented youth when their achievement values are not shared by their mainstream culture. They struggle to reconcile conflicting messages about what goals to pursue. The phenomenon itself is well researched, but effective strategies to deal with it have been less examined. However, an important finding so far is that certain kinds of supports seem to keep affiliation/achievement conflicts from undermining motivation and achievement. For instance, shared discourse about identity and achievement, and about the psychological costs of success appear to help talented students grow more confident in their ability to manage these conflicts. And normalizing these conflicts helps these students keep their experiences in perspective. Students need to be able to see, name, and talk about these issues in order to persevere.

Research concludes that the mental and emotional factors associated with high performance are not innate, but can be cultivated and shaped. It's possible to develop the mental habits that drive performance. We should be talking with our students. We should be talking about how realizing one's dreams requires self management skills and a psychological edge. To help talented young people negotiate the sometimes grueling

terrain of talent development, we need to provide them with more than academic skills. We need to equip them with psychological tools they can draw on when the going gets tough.

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