PERFORMANCE ENHANCEMENT THROUGH MENTAL PREPARATION STRATEGIES

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ABSTRACT

Numerous Self-management mental preparation strategies have been developed by psychologists and sports professionals as a means of facilitating better performance. This article reviews four cognitive self-management techniques: a) mental practice, b) positive self-talk, c) positive imagery, and d) psyching up. These performance improvement methods are discussed, focusing on their applicability for managers and executives in business and industry.

I. INTRODUCTION

This article outlines four mental preparation techniques utilized by individuals to improve their performance across a wide variety of arenas. Specifically, we discuss the strategies of mental practice, positive imagery, positive self-talk, and psyching up, along with their applicability for managers and executives in business and industry.

II. Mental practice

Mental practice is the symbolic, covert, mental rehearsal of a task in the absence of actual, overt, physical rehearsal (Driskell, Copper, & Moran, 1994). The primary emphasis in mental practice is on the cognitive rehearsal of a task sequence. For example, a candidate en route to an interview can mentally rehearse essential points and procedures she wants to establish in the upcoming interview.

In a comprehensive research review Driskell et al. (1994) examined 35 investigations on mental practice from 1934 thru 1991 and concluded the following: 1) mental practice has a moderate and significant impact on performance, however, the effects of mental practice are weaker than the effects of physical practice; 2) mental practice is effective for both cognitive (e.g., problem solving) and physical tasks (e.g., welding), however, the effect of mental practice is significantly stronger the more a task involves thinking; 3) with respect to the retention level, it was found that the longer the delay between mental practice and performance the weaker the effects of that practice on performance; the initial effects of mental practice were reduced to approximately one-half of their initial magnitude if the retention period was extended to two weeks, and after approximately 3 weeks, the increase in performance due to mental practice substantially dissipated. Therefore, to gain the maximum benefits of mental practice, one should implement refresher training on at least a 1- to 2-week schedule.

III. POSITIVE IMAGERY
Imagery may be defined as using all the senses to recreate or create an experience in the mind (Vealey & Walter, 1993). This definition contains two keys to understanding imagery: 1) Imagery as recreating or creating—Imagery involves recreating experiences, or reconstructing external events in our minds, to imitate others, to recall our own past experiences or even to create new experiences in our minds. Although imagery is essentially a product of memory, our brain is able to put the pieces to the "internal picture" together in different ways. As the programmer of our own imagery program, we are able to build an image from whatever pieces of memory we choose. 2) Imagery as a polysensory experience—A second key to understanding imagery is realizing that it can and should involve all the senses. Although imagery is often termed "visualization" or "seeing with the mind's eye," sight is not the only significant sense. Images can and should include as many senses as possible including sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch sensations. Sound might entail hearing the enthusiastic applause after you have made a speech. Smell could be the aroma of freshly made cereal at a customer's food manufacturing plant. An example of touch could be feeling the grip of a golf club or the pressure of the client shaking your hand after consummating a deal.

What this research suggests is that positive imagery and generating an explanation for the success can be beneficial in increasing performance. It is important to remember that imagery does not take the place of physical practice. Nor is a combination of physical practice and imagery more effective than total physical practice within the same time frame (Hired, Landers, Thomas, & Hogan, 1991). However positive imagery improves performance significantly more than no practice at all. Thus, think of imagery as a "vitamin supplement" that in addition to physical practice may give individuals an edge in competition. Imagery is valuable not as a replacement for physical practice but as a way to train the mind in conjunction with the training of the body. Imagery might be a useful substitute for physical practice when individuals are fatigued, injured, or sick and may provide just enough boost to conquer a final hurdle.

IV. Positive self-talk

The term "self-efficacy" refers to one's expectation of succeeding at a specific task or meeting a particular challenge. Self-efficacy can be considered a very specific form of self-confidence, the confidence to win a specific race, to make a particular presentation, or to defeat a certain opponent. According to Bandura (1986), self-efficacy is influenced by verbal persuasion, both from others and from self in the form of self-talk. The following questions provide insight into one's self-talk: "When I talk to myself, what do I say? What thoughts precede and accompany my good (bad) performances? Not only what thoughts, but how frequently am I talking to myself? When performing poorly, do I depreciate myself as a person? Are my comments about how I feel about myself, how others feel about me, how I may let down my friends and colleagues?"

Through positive self-talk, we can create and reinforce more constructive self-schemas—that is, the way we categorize and label ourselves. Self-talk can also enhance a person's sense of self-efficacy. Do I think of myself as an achieving, "can-do" type, or do I see myself as a failure? Positive self-talk can improve performance
but negative or self-defeating self-talk produces undesirable effects on performance (Rotella, Gansneder, Ojala, & Billing, 1980).

Martorano and Kildahl (1988) recommend the following strategies for developing positive self-talk: 1) Listen to your thoughts. Just as a behavioral change plan requires that attention first be paid to a baseline behavior, thoughts must be monitored; 2) Pinpoint negative self-talk. Identify self-defeating or negative words and phrases, such as "I'd like to try to sell to that customer, but I know I can't get in the door;" 3) Stop negative thoughts. Catch unproductive thinking and eliminate it. Be attentive to instances, thoughts, or phrases that are unproductive and then curb them promptly. Timely punishment of undesirable thoughts is necessary; 4) Accentuate the positive. Just as the use of positive reinforcement reduces both the need and time for punishment, positive thinking drives out and replaces negative thinking; 5) Reposition your behavior. Research shows that behavioral change can precede an attitudinal shift (Myers, 1996). Sometimes, simply engaging in a desired behavior can promote self-efficacy.

V. PSYCHING-UP STRATEGIES

The performance of motor skills by definition requires the integration of psychological and physiological systems. At some point, mental preparation must translate to physical performance. Failure to do so results in what might be termed; "leaving one's game in the locker room." Psyching up refers to the non-localized muscular activity associated with mental preparation that provides an over-all arousal for effective performance (Vealey & Walter, 1993). Arousal has often been defined physiologically as the intensity of behavior on a continuum from sleep to extensive excitement (Anshel, 1994). It has been shown that there is a level or a range of arousal that is optimal for performing certain activities (Landy, 1989). Above or below this optimal level, performance may suffer.

Arousal or "psyching-up" does not occur in a vacuum however. Reaching a proper level of arousal requires associated positive thoughts and feelings. Oxendine (1970) noted the importance of positive and negative feelings associated with being psyched up. He concluded that tasks that require fine motor skills such as golf putting and bowling need less arousal than gross motor tasks that require more powerful movements such as football blocking and swimming. Raedeke and Stein (1994) found that high levels of arousal were not associated with poor skiing performance if the arousal was accompanied by positive thoughts and feelings. Therefore, these findings suggest that arousal involves an emotional component. It is also worth noting that the effects of the level of arousal on performance may vary depending upon whether the task is thought or action oriented (Anderson, 1990).

Psyching up involves more than just mental practice. It also involves physical aspects. To be mentally prepared to compete on any level, one must have mastered a skill to the point that performance comes naturally and automatically. Thus, the skill becomes second nature. For example, the position of the baseball in a player's hand is not something the athlete has to think about while making a play. The player merely adjusts the ball in the hand without consciously processing the thought. The player has overlearned the skill or practiced to a level of mastery that problems are reacted to automatically (Tutko & Tosi, 1976). Psyching-up, then,
should be a part of all phases of performing.

VI. SUMMARY

This article has reviewed four mental preparation strategies that have been shown to enhance performance. Either alone or together each technique was shown to contribute to increased levels of performance. Mental practice impacts performance positively by having individuals cognitively rehearse a task sequence: positive imagery helps create a vivid representation of the finalized task thereby increasing levels of arousal and motivation; positive self-talk can improve performance because of its influence on an individual's level of self-efficacy which has been shown to be positively associated with performance increases; finally, psyching up can enhance performance by helping an individual attain an optimum level of physiological arousal necessary for high levels of performance.

VII. REFERENCES


