

JUNE 2013



No Pressure, No Diamonds: Reconciling Mental Health With High Performance

BY DANE JENSEN, PERFORMANCE COACHING COO, AND SANDRA STARK, PERFORMANCE COACHING PARTNER

It's 11AM, mid-February in an Olympic year. The Canadian women's synchronized swimming team is practicing at the Etobicoke Olympium. In fact, they've been in the water for 5 straight hours, since they arrived in the dark, snowy parking lot at 6AM and, shivering, changed into their swimsuits and slipped into the pool.

There is still another hour of pool time to go before a short lunch and then a grueling afternoon of conditioning and weights. The team is exhausted, cold, sore, and tired but no one—athlete or coach—is letting up. They have been doing

this, at this level, for months—and they are still six months from the Games.

Truly elite coaches are constantly walking the line between an environment where high performance will flourish and one that will, quite literally, break their young charges. The space between eating like an Olympic athlete and developing an eating disorder is remarkably narrow, as is the space between “demanding 100%” and setting impossible standards that lead to burnout or depression. Good coaches consciously work to find that balance.

The level of pressure put on these young athletes—physically, mentally, and emotionally—ahead of a big competition such as the Olympics is far beyond what most people could tolerate. But, it's the pressure required to get the extra effort needed to truly compete at a world-class level.

If you're a business leader, you know how important pressure is in moving forward. You've lived under the gun; you've passed through the crucible of failure, of impossible deadlines, of unreasonable expectations. And, it's part of what has made you successful today.

Reading about the duty of care for managers can make you feel like you've crash-landed in a particularly politically correct part of Planet HR

How, then, do you reconcile your experience of what it takes to succeed with the growing conversation on mental health? Reading about the duty of care for managers can make you feel like you've crash-landed in a particularly politically correct part of Planet HR: Providing information only as needed? Cause of mental injury. Showing favoritism? Cause of mental injury. Not allocating enough resources to get the job done properly? Cause of mental injury¹.

And, this is beyond the realm of theory. Legal precedent is rapidly being established that holds managers accountable to these high standards, and is expected to accelerate with the publishing of the National Psychological Health & Safety Standard in Canada earlier this year.

Even as a compassionate person, with a very real desire to ensure a mentally healthy work environment, you might reasonably ask: where does personal responsibility on the part of the employee come in here? And, how can I as a manager move others to high performance if I am constantly worried about creating any stress or pressure?

BEFORE WE START: DEFINING MENTAL HEALTH

An important caveat before we proceed: there is a significant difference between 'mental illness' such as schizophrenia, severe depression, or bi-polar disorder, and preventable mental injury caused by workplace stressors. Mental illness is a medical condition and needs to be accommodated. Training and assistance for managers with respect to mental illness is a crucial part of any organization's HR strategy. This is important work, and it is not what we will be talking about in this article.

Up to one-third of the \$2.75Bn in annual mental health costs that directly impact Canadian employers, however, fall into the category of 'preventable mental injury'²—anxiety due to workload, feeling unfairly treated and unable to speak up, stress overload from working too many hours, etc.—and can be managed. And so, where the 'rubber hits the road' for our purposes is the thorny question of how we reconcile our duty (morally, and increasingly legally) to prevent avoidable mental injury with a need for high performance.

While it might sound a little 'zen', the first step in breaking the logjam between mental health and high performance is to recognize that there is no logjam

BREAKING THE LOG-JAM

While it might sound a little 'zen', the first step in breaking the logjam between mental health and high performance is to recognize that there is no logjam. Pressure is not just inevitable—but actually essential—in an environment where high performance is expected. And, effectively channeling pressure to ignite growth is a hallmark of mentally healthy individuals. In fact, our most satisfying life experiences usually involve working towards a challenging goal, overcoming obstacles, and arriving. In short: when the right conditions, skills, and tools are in place, pressure is good for both performance and mental health.

1. National Standard of Canada – Psychological Health And Safety In the Workplace (CSA Group / BNQ, 2013)

2. A New Roadmap Towards Psychological Health and Safety For Organizations In Canada (Mental Health Works, 2013)

This realization opens the door to a discussion around mental health that is significantly more inspiring. Rather than the reductive (and unrealistic) question of—“how do I eliminate stress and pressure to prevent mental injury?”—we can start to tackle a performance question—“how, in the face of pressure for results, do I achieve Healthy High Performance?”

And this is where sport psychology, or performance psychology, comes in. While traditional psychology has primarily focused on dysfunction, sport psychology has focused on mapping out the opposite end of the continuum—seeking to understand what exceptional performers like the synchronized swimmers we met at the start of this article do on a day-to-day basis to perform at incredibly high levels under pressure.

So, what does performance psychology have to say about how you can harness pressure to move yourself and others to Healthy High Performance? Let’s look at the implications.

ACHIEVING HEALTHY HIGH PERFORMANCE: POWER PLANTS, SURGE PROTECTORS, AND POWER CONVERTERS

During the World Junior Hockey Championships in 2011, Nike put their signature, memorable spin on the link between pressure and performance. Through a barrage of TV ads, they declared, “pressure is power.” There is wisdom in that quote: power can heat your house, but it can also burn it down. In addition, it provides a perfect analogy for examining the role of the three critical elements of the work environment that determine whether pressure will lead to Healthy High Performance, or down the path to mental injury.

 THE POWER PLANT THE ORGANIZATION	 THE SURGE PROTECTOR THE LEADER	 THE POWER CONVERTER THE EMPLOYEE
Regulates the overall level of 'current' in the system and provides access to support resources along with the 'permission' to use them	Acts as a firewall from 'surges' rather than an additional source of pressure, and takes conscious action to channel pressure towards igniting growth and development	'Converts' pressure into higher levels of performance through skilled use of a personal resilience toolkit

As you can see, there is a role for every level in the organization in creating healthy high performance. And the tasks are not onerous. In fact they are energizing.

It is important that as managers and employees we do not let an imperfectly operating power plant act as an excuse for cynicism.

Engaging Senior Leadership in ensuring the ‘power plant’ isn’t sending too much voltage down the line and provides support resources is a key element of a systemic push for Healthy High Performance. At the same time, it is important that as managers and employees we do not let an imperfectly operating power plant act as an excuse for cynicism.

In my role as a ‘power converter’—I play the most critical role in transforming the stress and pressure I feel into high performance. Healthy High Performance is an inside job: the only person who can transform stress into a growth experience for me, is me. So, first, I need to learn the skills of personal resilience and be equipped to take responsibility for how I relate to the reality in which I work.

Secondly, I need to have a manager on my side who has authority and my respect, who sees the pressure and talks about it, strategizes around it, and stays sensitive to its impact. Helplessness is at the core of the negative impact of stress—people need permission to recognize it, a language to talk about it, and help creating plans to take charge rather than being whipped by it. And, I need to be that ‘surge protector’ for my employees.

What is unrealistic, bad for performance, and ultimately dangerous, however, is to presume that you, and others like you in the organization, should ‘pull themselves up by their boot-straps’ into fully formed and functional ‘surge protectors’ or ‘power converters’. In addition to support from the organization and managers, employees and managers need to be provided with opportunities to learn the inner skills necessary to transform stress and pressure into growth.

In sport, it is understood that this is the final step in high performance. It is not expected that athletes and coaches will innately know how to do this stuff. Elite athletes today are all offered and taught skills for handling the stress of training and the pressure of competition. Why would it be any different in the corporate world?

“NO PRESSURE, NO DIAMONDS”

Working to simply protect yourself and others from harm by eliminating as much stress and pressure as you can is not motivating—or, frankly, realistic. Nor, as it turns out, is it any good for performance.

Moving to Healthy High Performance by providing leaders and employees with the tools to convert pressure into the fuel that ignites high performance, while supported by an organization that ‘gets it’ and isn’t afraid of it, is a sustainable way forward that can balance the needs for performance with the desire we all share for mentally healthy workplaces.

To Be Continued ...

This is the first in a series of IGNITE articles on Healthy High Performance. Starting in September’s issue, we will go in-depth into the specific actions you can take to create Healthy High Performance environments in your role as an employee, manager, or senior leader. If you have any questions in the interim, please don’t hesitate to contact us via the contact information below.

Dane Jensen is the Chief Operating Officer of Performance Coaching, and can be reached at dane.jensen@performancecoaching.ca, Sandra Stark is a Partner at Performance Coaching and can be reached at sandra.stark@performancecoaching.ca.
Copyright © 2013 Performance Coaching Inc. All rights reserved.