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Performing under pressure:

Paying attention counts

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*What do Navy SEALs, Olympic medalists, top business executives, police and emergency workers have in common? They need to perform well under pressure. Performing well under pressure is all about attentional control. You cannot have control over your attention if you aren't aware of your own tendencies. In all of our work with folks from the above sectors we recommend the TAIS (The Attentional and Interpersonal Style) assessment. This instrument, which we use in our **S.W.O.T. programs**, provides tremendous self-awareness and great guidance in how to enhance your performance under pressure.*

One of the most critical factors in performance is the ability to pay attention to the right thing at the right time. In

fact, it may be the most critical psychological factor in performance. We certainly know this to be true in elite sport. At Performance Coaching, whenever we are working with athletes, one of the first things we do is assess the athlete's attentional preferences. We need to know what they are most likely to pay attention to—especially under pressure—and what will distract them from paying attention to what matters most. Even for the very best athletes in the world, the number-one factor in a poor performance comes from being distracted—that is, paying attention to something other than those actions and thoughts that guarantee an optimal performance.

A SHIFTING PLAYING FIELD

For athletes and non-athletes alike, the ability to direct attention is no small feat. It takes tremendous self-awareness and consciousness. Each situation has different attentional demands, which can change from moment to moment, and the ability to shift attentional focus as required—and on demand—can be difficult. It is far too easy for attention to get snagged by something irrelevant. The difficulty may increase depending on each person's attentional profile and the amount of pressure the individual is feeling in each circumstance.

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Dr. Robert Nideffer, an American sport psychologist, has studied attention under pressure and developed the The Attentional and Interpersonal Style (TAIS) instrument to measure individuals' attentional and interpersonal styles. We saw the value of this self knowledge for the corporate sector very early and now have eight highly trained coaches who

work with our corporate clients, helping them see how their attentional profiles affect not only their individual performance but how they perform on the various committees and teams in their work world.

At Performance Coaching we use the TAIS instrument to assess a number of critical factors that affect our clients' ability to perform:

- › how they are most likely to react attentionally under pressure
- › what will cause them pressure
- › what will distract them

This information allows us to help them come up with a plan to leverage their strengths and minimize and prepare for their vulnerable areas under pressure.

HOW DOES THIS WORK?

Through his research Nideffer has broken attention down into two dimensions: direction and width.

In terms of direction, attention can be external or internal in that a person can be paying attention to something out in the room or be caught up internally with thoughts and ideas. But attention also has width to it. Sometimes attention is very narrow and focused on a single object while at other times it is much broader and takes in a wider array of objects or thoughts.

By combining these two dimensions—direction and width—Nideffer arrived at four ways of paying attention. A **broad external** focus occurs when you are reading and reacting to the environment. For example, you arrive at a party and survey the room in order to decide where you want to be and whom you want to be talking to. A **broad internal** focus, on the other hand, is one where you analyze a lot of ideas or data or, perhaps, run several possible scenarios through your mind to figure out the most appropriate solution for a problem. You are paying attention to what is going on in your head versus the environment. A **narrow external** focus is required for successfully hitting a baseball or executing a project or directing an individual. A **narrow internal** focus might involve staying focused on a single goal, getting in touch with a feeling or thought, or perhaps meditating with intense concentration on your breath.

Research has shown that the narrow styles tend to be less differentiated and are often used together. For example, when writing a report you probably shift focus frequently between narrow internal and narrow external. This also occurs when you're having a conversation with another individual. Nideffer called this attentional style **Focus** or **Action**, because it is generally used when getting things done. The broad external style he simply called **Aware**. This awareness reflects that the person using this style of attention is totally in touch with what's going on around them in the external world. He labeled the broad internal style **Conceptual** because those who pay attention in this style are analyzing and planning—in other words, conceptualizing.

WHY DOES THIS MATTER?

One of the key concepts that comes out of Nideffer's research is that individuals can only pay attention in one style at a time. The minute you are in Focus, for example, you cannot be in either of the other styles. This works well when the demands of the situation call for that particular style. However, problems arise if another style would be more appropriate for the situation. When this occurs he calls it overload or distractibility. Imagine this common scenario: You're having a conversation with a co-worker and you should be in the Focus style but you're constantly looking at the people walking around you. In this case not only are you going to miss some of what your co-worker says, but your co-worker is going to pick up very quickly that you are not fully engaged. We've all experienced this—from both sides!

The key is to know your attentional profile so you can adjust depending on the situational demands.

APPLYING THIS KNOWLEDGE

All of us have one attentional style that will be stronger than the others. That's the good news. The not-so-good news is that we will become distracted and less effective when we use that style when it isn't appropriate. It is very easy for your strength to become your weakness if you continue to use it in all circumstances. The key here is to know your attentional profile so you can prepare and adjust how you pay attention depending on the situational demands. This is particularly true when you are under pressure—just like our successful Olympic athletes.

In the business world, the implications of this research can be powerful. For example, different people working in a group have different strong attentional styles. Some people are much more comfortable focusing for a long period of time on a single project, which is important in getting things done. Once focused on a task they really don't see what else is going on around them. Others are more aware of the external environment and better able to read what is happening in a group or a department; for example, they are aware of the politics and pressures that may be coming from the top, and they can bring that valuable information to the team. While working under pressure, success as a team may hinge on recognizing the different attentional strengths of each individual. In our workshops we always find it very interesting for individuals and team members to discover that what appeared to be a lack of interest, for example, on the part of one person ends up simply being an attentional issue.

Here's what Peter says about his personal discovery of his own attentional styles: "When I became aware of my attentional strengths and weaknesses as well as my tendency to overload or get distracted, the simple act of knowing and noticing allowed me to redirect my attention—and I saved a lot of time by learning to recognize and eliminate distractions. Many of us spend a fair amount of time in the wrong attentional focus and it is quite astounding how much time we find when we learn to catch ourselves."

At Performance Coaching we believe there is a tremendous amount to be gained in receiving coaching in this area. That is what we do in our S.W.O.T. programs. Our experience has shown that very little attention is paid to the ability to manage and direct attention in the performance arena. We have had some astounding feedback from very high-level individuals and teams on the impact our S.W.O.T. programs have had on performance. For example, Charlie Fischer CEO of Nexen, has expressed tremendous appreciation for the impact the SWOT team program had on his executive team ([read his comments](#)). Other key clients such as the Queen's Executive Development program, Syncrude, Hydro One, the Women's Olympic Hockey team, Skate Canada and the City of Burlington have expressed similar feedback on their experience with our S.W.O.T. workshops for individuals and teams. Perhaps it is time for you to give some attention to how you pay attention.

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