



Bounce! Hit!

By Chris Morgan

Achieving the right state of mind is important to maximize performance in both business and sports. Sports psychologists and coaches know that getting athletes to focus their awareness on the key physical elements of their game helps to quiet the mind and bring about this optimal mental state. So what should the business executive focus on to achieve the right mental state and performance; what is the business equivalent of Bounce! Hit!?

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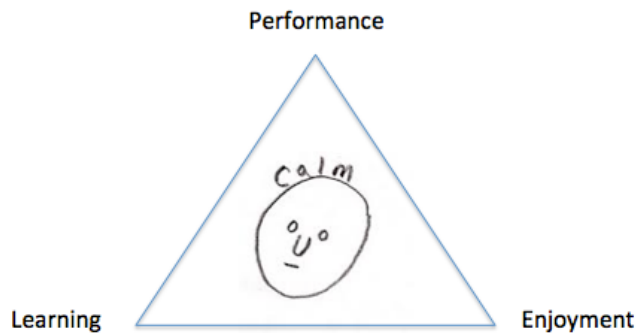
Mental State

Tim Gallwey is one of the most recognized names in Coaching. In 1976, sales of his bestselling and breakthrough book The Inner Game of Tennis¹ exceeded all preceding tennis instruction books combined. His insight that caught the attention of a broad public, not just tennis players, was that the right mental state, *non-judgmental awareness* was his term, is more important to superior performance than technique. Actually, he took it further than that and claimed that *non-judgmental awareness* was at the center of superior learning and enjoyment as well as performance.

Gallwey's coaching technique was fascinating to observe. Instead of analyzing his student's mechanics and then providing them with advice and drills on what they needed to change, he would start by asking his students what they wanted to work on. Then he would continue his coaching sessions with a light-hearted invitation "Let's take a look at that. Don't worry about doing it right. Show me how badly you do it if you like." Both of these techniques, letting the student chose the coaching goal and allowing poor performance, were designed to encourage non-judgmental awareness. But this was just the beginning of his coaching method. From here, Gallwey would use a variety of techniques to help focus and quiet his students' minds.

His most famous instruction was to ask students to say "Bounce" when they observed the ball bounce, and "Hit" when they made contact with the ball. There were many other similar instructions, each adapted to the situation and the sport. For a tennis serve, it might be "tell me what you see when the ball is at the top of your throw", for golf it might be to say "back" when the club changes direction over head, then "hit" when the club head connects with the ball. For skiing it might be "now" when the weight changes from one ski to the other. Far from the traditional coaching approach of telling students what to do differently, his instructions were designed to bring about the right mental state – one in which learning would happen without being disturbed by the mental chatter and emotional burden of trying to do it right. Learning the same way a child would learn to walk he would say.

Non-judgmental Awareness



Gallwey's work turned heads in the corporate world too, and still does. The idea that a manager can be an effective coach through a facilitative rather than expert approach has great appeal for modern organizations where the manager simply cannot have superior subject matter expertise than his or her direct reports. His philosophy has spawned a generation of Executive Coaches, and his method is embedded in the core curriculum of Coach training. The most widely known coaching model (GROW) is built around this facilitative, student led approach. John Whitmore, who popularized this model in his book Coaching for Performance² started the Inner Game office in London in 1976 after a BBC documentary had stirred considerable public interest.

Gallwey is by no means the only sports psychologist to have found an audience among corporate executives and to talk about Ideal Performance States. Jim Loehr's seminal book Mental Toughness Training³ first published in 1984 was also initially targeted to a sporting audience and profiled the mental training of some of his world-class athletes such as Dan Jansen, Chris Evert (before Lloyd), Monica Seles, and Tom Kite. But he has also been published more recently in Harvard Business Review* appealing to an audience equally familiar with the demand for excellence, endurance, and the need to cope with stress and performance anxiety. Like Gallwey and others, much of Loehr's counsel to the Corporate Athlete is to train the right mental state for performance.

Sports vs Business

Some aspects of Gallwey's model and the idea of cultivating an ideal mental state are easy to translate to a business setting, and have been by many executive coaches and those teaching coaching. But other aspects of this approach are more difficult to translate, and can in fact be counterproductive. His approach emerged with the Human Potential movement of the late 60s and early 70's and the idea that 'the

solution lies within' and that raised awareness of the situation is all that is needed. His facilitative coaching style and its faith in the inherent wisdom of human nature stood proudly against the traditional culture of coaching; a patronizing approach in which the student is assessed, criticized and told what to do!

Gallwey's approach starts by letting the student choose the coaching goal, turning the authority relationship on its head. On one hand this increases buy-in to the coaching conversation and encourages the student to be thoughtful about their development needs. On the other hand, especially in a business situation, there are a number of reasons that the coach must be more directive about the coaching agenda, particularly when the person you are coaching is blind to their development needs or underestimates the importance.

Perhaps you have just observed a presentation to the Executive Committee that fell short of the mark. Perhaps, you are seeing efficiencies being discussed, but insufficient urgency being applied. Perhaps you have heard a couple of comments about one of your team member's 'attitude'.

As Coach, whether line manager, mentor, HR or external coach, you know you need to direct the discussion to these particular challenges. The question is how to approach the discussion while still gaining buy-in to the learning experience and not putting your colleague into a defensive or deflated headspace. Neither the overly directive traditional style of coaching, nor the overly facilitative human potential approach will work. Coaching in business calls for a hybrid approach; a method that allows the coach to define 'the game' for improvement, then draws on the student's interests to gain the benefits of the right mental state.

Using this hybrid approach, once we have set up the topic for discussion, we can then ask the person being coached to reflect on that topic, to discuss their views of what went well, what could have been better and their personal goals in this regard. It blends the need for the coach to direct the discussion to a particular challenge, but allows the coachee to reflect on their performance without judgment and to identify their own development needs.

Or at least this is what good coaches hope for. Sometimes our colleagues' lack of appreciation about their need for development is a reflection on the shortcomings of the organization and its managers in setting clear expectations and providing good feedback. Whereas on the tennis court, the students' development need is likely to be fairly self evident, in many companies the ingredients for success are too often unclear and unspoken. The best managed companies, and the best managers set clear expectations. Google, rated #1 by Best Place To Work research⁴ conducts official performance review/feedback cycles 'Perfs' four times a year. Boston Consulting Group, the second company on this list, provides its consultants with rich multi-perspective feedback against the expected dimensions of performance every six weeks! One might think that more frequent feedback would be associated with

more anxiety and a less calm mental state, yet here we see the opposite. One of the key measures for The Best Place To Work researchers is the amount of trust that employees put in their managers (coaches). It turns out that more of the right kind of feedback leads to more trust and workplace satisfaction as well as learning.

While we should do our best as coaches to bring about the right mental state for learning and performance, setting clear expectations and providing constructive, accurate feedback is even more fundamental. In fact, I worry that many coaches abandon these fundamentals, possibly worrying that clarifying performance requirements and providing candid feedback will harm the safe feeling and easy rapport of a good coaching relationship.

As coaches, we should certainly follow our coachee's interests, trying to help them articulate their own development needs, and to do so in a way that feels supportive rather than critical. But this cannot be at the cost of an honest assessment. Avoiding the truth about performance and what the development needs are to succeed may provide some 'feel good' factor but it is a real disservice to the person you are trying to help.

¹ Tim Gallwey, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, Random House, 1976

² John Whitmore, *Coaching For Performance*, Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 1992

³ Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, *The Making of Corporate Athlete*, Harvard Business Review, January 2001

⁴ *100 Best Companies To Work For*, Fortune Magazine, Annual