

Preparing to perform at the top: 2

Staying at the top of your game

Last time we described how Julian Goodman & Penny Mallory had used their coaching to prepare to perform at a specific event. (Interview & keynote speaking). Continuing the same theme, this time we can report how two more clients have been preparing for specific performances.

BRASSED OFF? NOT ANY MORE ...



Aidan McConville started playing the French Horn when he was 13 and went on to study at Trinity College of Music, only recently finishing a Postgraduate Diploma for which he gained a scholarship. He's already played with many leading orchestras and is currently principal and soloist with the Orchestra of the City and a member of SE10 Brass, a new 10-piece award-winning ensemble with a rapidly growing reputation ... so he's a talented young man!

But like many of his fellow professional musicians, he suffered with nerves and a lack of concentration during performances. As Aidan explained: "Although performance technique was part of my training, there's no one-size-fits all and it obviously wasn't the answer for me."

So, about two years ago, Aidan decided to seek help through coaching. Using deep meditation techniques, Aidan's coach helped him to realise that it wasn't the actual performance that was the problem. The key was to work on having confidence in his own technique and ability, neither of which were in question. By focusing on people he admired, Aidan could believe that there was no reason why he shouldn't be equally successful. (In fact, Lewis Hamilton is now one of Aidan's inspirations!)

Aidan has been practising these techniques ever since, with regular refresher sessions with his coach. But performing wasn't the only problem: musicians spend a good deal of time attending auditions, which bring different pressures.

"In an audition you're not entertaining, you're being judged by experts," says Aidan, "so it's even more pressurised and you only get about 20 minutes to impress. I used to get very nervous and pretty much talk myself

out of success.

"I had a particularly bad experience during an audition in Sweden not long ago. I'd not had much sleep, I was tired from travelling and I just got wound up. Needless to say it didn't go to plan!"

Aidan wanted to learn from this and again sought help from his coach. This time they used visualisation techniques to create and practise being comfortable in an audition situation. This involved music recordings and essential oils which Aidan was able to use during his preparation to recreate a strong feeling of extreme confidence.

"I was surprised how effective it was," says Aidan. "Because I wanted to succeed, I was prepared to be open-minded but I hadn't realised the overwhelming power of the subconscious. I can now cope so much better with the often less than ideal and unexpected conditions of auditions because I can tap into that familiar place in myself.

"Coaching has really helped me to raise my game. I've been incredibly happy with my performances and that's been confirmed by other professional players. It's fantastic!"

A RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

Public speaking, especially to a large audience of your peers, is a daunting business, no matter who you are or how many times you've presented before. Even the larger-than-life chef, restaurateur and columnist Heston Blumenthal decided to enlist expert help in preparing for his particular big moment in the spotlight recently – addressing over 2000 international chefs, culinary experts and journalists at two high profile annual gastronomic congress events in Spain.



Coaching for Success has worked with musicians, sports personalities and businessmen and women, helping them to deliver their optimum performance in a variety of situations. They've been working with Heston on a regular basis, most recently in helping to turn his philosophy of the multi-sensory dining experience into reality for customers at his world-renowned restaurant, The Fat Duck.

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As a true innovator, Heston has been developing a method of engaging with diners in a very special way, starting from the moment they call to make their table reservation. Using an extraordinary combination of multi-sensory communication tools – including telephone voice-overs, website images, give-aways impregnated with special aromas – he aims to instil a sense of curiosity and excitement into the dining experience.

And it was on that subject that Heston spoke to audiences in Madrid and San Sebastian. The key challenge for Heston was to deliver his 40 minute presentation without notes – no mean feat. *“I do have a tendency to go off on a tangent and lose focus when I’m talking. I suppose it happens when, like me, you’re really passionate about your subject.”*

First, Heston worked on getting really clear about out what he wanted the audience to take away with them after the presentation. Because the project was still in development, Heston found he was concentrating on the things that hadn’t gone to plan, rather than the positive achievements and what had been learned along the way.

“I used the experience to improve for the event in Madrid. And I’ll carry on using the visualisation techniques for future presentations.”

The next step for Heston to create pictures in his mind – a sort of mental storyboard – that would lead him through the presentation in the right order, making sure nothing was left out. He had given himself a particularly tough job because the audience were handed out samples to taste during the talk ... meaning that both he and they could have been easily distracted from the flow.

The final step was to rehearse his presentation in detail, experiencing it with all his senses – how it sounded, how it felt – from inside, as well as from the perspective of someone in the audience – so that he could effectively be his own critic, watching himself speaking and seeing where he could make improvements and refinements.

Mike Duckett explains: *“This is often called visualisation (although it engages many more than just the visual senses) – or cognitive rehearsal – and it’s a very powerful way of enabling people to experience and even practise a desired outcome that is within their control, so that they can reproduce the necessary behaviours in the real situation.”*

So how did it go? *“Both presentations went really well,”* said Heston, *“despite the unforeseen difficulties I had to contend with in San Sebastian.”*

... not only did Heston have to deliver his talk with the distraction of simultaneous translation into Spanish on stage, but his time slot was effectively halved as he had to stay silent while the translator spoke ... !

“I used the experience to improve for the event in Madrid. And I’ll carry on using the visualisation techniques for future presentations. I was wary of not using notes, but now I know I can do it and I understand the fundamental importance of keeping your goal firmly in your sights.”

Teamwork & Creativity

MIX IT UP!

You might think that if you can keep a team stable i.e. not keep changing membership then people will feel more comfortable and not afraid of proposing new ideas. Not according to Nemeth & Ormiston writing in the Journal of Social Psychology.

They found that although a stable team may indeed feel more comfortable, there is actually a loss of creativity. They created two sets of teams - one set with constant membership and one set where the members of the teams in the sets were moved around. All teams were set various tasks and then finally asked to either think of new ways to increase tourism in the San Francisco Bay area or new ways to decrease traffic congestion. Independent observers kept notes on the number of ideas and contributions made by the team members.



Although the stable groups reported feeling that their teams were friendlier, more comfortable and more creative, the reality was that the newly formed teams generated more ideas which were judged to be more diverse and of better quality.

So it seems change and new perspectives are more important for creativity than friendliness, comfort and belonging.

Home Working

MORE STRESSFUL FOR WOMEN?

It can sound like a cushy number; the commute is short and there’s no boss breathing down your neck. But what’s the downside? Terry Hartig et al looked at how ‘teleworking’ might compromise the home as a place of refuge and recuperation. They surveyed 58 teleworkers and 43 office based employees of the Swedish National Energy Administration to see how much overlap there was between home and work life.

They discovered a big difference between the sexes. Male teleworkers seemed to suffer less overlap than their office counterparts! Women on the other hand suffered much more work/life overlap, suggesting that they may be more susceptible to the costs of working from home.



The Rest of Life

GRATITUDE: THE PARENT OF ALL VIRTUES?

In an interesting review by Alex Wood et al (The Psychologist V20 1) they remind us that Cicero said 'gratitude is not only the greatest of the virtues but the parent of all others'.

...do what your granny told you and 'count your blessings'!

Gratitude has played a central role in many religions including Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Lots of studies have reported that people who feel more gratitude are more likely to have higher levels of happiness and lower levels of stress, better immune systems and better physical health. Indeed it seems gratitude has one of the strongest links with mental health of any personality variable. It may also be uniquely important in social relationships—grateful people have better social relationships with greater closeness and support. Also grateful people are seen by others as:

- ≠ Empathetic
- ≠ Agreeable
- ≠ Extraverted

So, does the research on having a grateful disposition tell us anything useful for our coaching clients? Are people grateful because of success or are they successful due to a grateful disposition? Certainly, experimental evidence suggests that increasing your levels of gratitude leads to greater wellbeing. But you might think that this would be short lived because we know that people rapidly adjust to new circumstances e.g. lottery winners are no happier one year after the win and wealth is only slightly related to happiness.



Woods and his research colleagues feel that gratitude will be found to operate in an upward spiral whereby being grateful leads to greater success which then leads to gratitude—kicking off the cycle.

So what could you do to practice or develop more gratitude? One very simple but truly valuable exercise is to do what your granny told you and 'count your blessings'! Two studies are reported; in one, clients were asked to write a letter to someone who had helped them at some point—their happiness scores increased by 10%. In another people were asked to make a daily list of 3 good things about their life and were found to have increased happiness scores each time they were tested. The biggest benefit was actually seen 6 months later, probably because people had continued doing the exercise out of choice!

MEDITATION MAKES THE MOST OF LIMITED BRAIN RESOURCES!

Ever heard a colleague claim 'information overload' (sometimes expressed as "my brain hurts!")? Well now you could recommend they begin practicing meditation.



Researchers recently measured what psychologists call 'attention blink'; the inability to notice something at the end of a string of events because the brain is temporarily using all its processing capacity to attend to something else. They then split people into two groups and put one group through intensive 3 month meditation training. These people demonstrated significantly improved performance on the attentional blink tests, being able to 'spread' their information processing resources, noticing more events in the string.

DO WOMEN REALLY TALK MORE THAN MEN?

We thought about cutting and pasting a number of internet jokes based on this assumed difference between the sexes—but though better of it! Scientifically speaking (much safer), neuropsychiatrists have quoted figures such as women using 20,000 words per day while men use only 7,000.

Anyway it seems it may not be true after all.

In the USA Mehl et al gave 396 people EARS (actually a recording device that periodically recorded snippets of ambient sound, including conversations, while they went about their normal day).

And the findings? Well both men and women spoke an average of approximately 16,000 words per day. So no difference there then!

Ed. Please note that even the researchers mention a possible limitation in the research in that all subjects were students. So there's no comment on the quality of the conversations in either group!



Addressing Complex Team & Organisational Issues

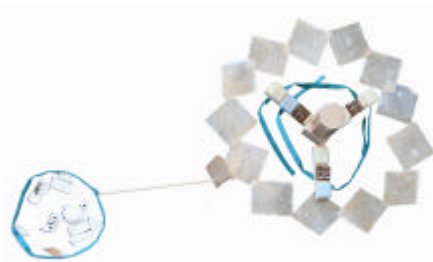
Cognitive Dialogue: Thinking Together

Ever had that experience of “I know what I want to say but I just can’t find the words”? This suggests to us that we all grasp very complex, abstract concepts in a much more complete way than we are often aware. Indeed rational adult language is often a barrier to full expression.

Imagine then, trying to get 55 individuals to design one agreed “*method of working together that is ideal for our customers, us (as individuals) and the organisation*”.

Recently we have been applying the coaching approach to group tasks such as this, using a unique process developed out of our one-to-one work. Some of our clients will know first hand the value of developing their own unique metaphor for a desired outcome and how to achieve it (*ed: See ‘Like a Kid in a Sweetshop’ at www.cleanlanguage.co.uk*)

We can now facilitate groups to access a level of understanding that normally remains unconscious but which, once expressed metaphorically using



symbols, can be modelled in the real world using special materials. This model is full of information and meaning to those who have created it

but means absolutely nothing to those not involved! So the final step in the facilitation process is to help the modelling team describe the meaning of their

model in a way that can be communicated to the rest of the organisation.

As well as the example quoted above, which involved 55 facilities management staff from 3 different geographical sites, we have worked on a number of different team & organisational projects including:

- ✧ A marketing dept. that wished to ‘*improve our connections*’
- ✧ An engineering team that wanted to ‘*work better as a team*’
- ✧ An international team that wanted to ‘*operate effectively across cultural boundaries*’

Just one of the benefits of working this way is that as well as being able to express complex abstract concepts, people are able to have conversations with each other that couldn’t take place otherwise. For example, one team were able to challenge their manager’s preferred style of working (controlling) and finally all agree a new way forward that allowed for his preferences yet gave them more autonomy.

We would love to hear from you if you feel you would like one of your teams or even the whole organisation to collaboratively explore new ways of working or other complex ideas.

**Please call us on 0800 2889867
(We can have some Cognitive Dialogue!)**

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About us

Coaching for Success provides executive and personal coaching that helps individuals perform to their maximum potential.

Our corporate client list covers a range of industry sectors, including pharmaceutical, retail, finance and construction, and high profile names such as John Laing, Novartis, KPMG, Abbott and Johnson Controls.

Our coaches work with company personnel, on a one-to-one basis, enabling them to recognise the choices and opportunities available to them, to make decisions about career and personnel development and then to create and implement a plan of action designed to achieve success.

We provide professional coaching in the areas of:

- ? Executive Coaching
- ? Life Coaching
- ? Performance Coaching