

Performing under Pressure

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“ When it comes to achieving success in business, the route to the top is not dissimilar to that taken by elite athletes. Top performers in sport and business understand how to optimise their psychological and physical strengths to cope well under pressure. ”

A 2008 study published in the *European Heart Journal* found that biological changes in the body brought on by stress significantly increased the risk of coronary heart disease. Stress has now become the second most cited work related health problem, affecting 22% of workers in the European Union.

In today's highly competitive and demanding business environment, already stretched executives are grappling with the challenge of performing well under conditions of extreme change and uncertainty. Many of the physical and psychological demands placed on the 'corporate athlete' mirror those of the 'athletic athlete', albeit in a different context. Busy managers are frequently required to cope with high levels of stress, heavy workloads and demanding organisational circumstances.

This challenge is not dissimilar to that faced by elite athletes who follow prolonged training regimes interspersed with periods of competition where they have to perform at their peak.

So what are the physical capabilities that executives should foster in order to perform at their best? The first is rest and recovery. Overworked executives would benefit from understanding what elite athletes already know: sufficient recovery is as important as energy expenditure. Know which tasks you find hardest. If you need to perform at 90% for an important event then it is a good idea to plan in some less difficult tasks prior. For example, attend to activities which require 40% effort or less and make sure you plan for some rest afterwards. Building these natural peaks and troughs into work patterns introduces variability which is a key component of effective performance.

The second factor is hydration. On average, adults need to drink two litres of water per day (twelve glasses). A 1% loss in hydration level impacts mood, concentration, anger control and cognitive function. If you are thirsty, it is likely that you are dehydrated.

Pay attention to nutrition. Having breakfast every day, eating little and often to maintain energy levels and avoiding the 'sugar rush' as a result of eating simple sugars like chocolate or biscuits are all good ways to maintain energy and control weight. Balance complex carbohydrates such as bananas, pasta and potatoes with protein and avoid eating 'on the move'.


Stress is a common derailer of performance. Athletes experience this as the overtraining syndrome, when they experience excessive training loads coupled with inadequate recovery.

For the corporate athlete, sustained periods of stress may result in chronic fatigue which affects the immune system, mood, sleep, libido and appetite.

Pressure from stress is inevitable but individuals vary significantly in their ability to handle pressure depending on their perception of which events are stressful. Emotional resilience is a notable characteristic of people who thrive under pressure.

Elite performers in all walks of life systematically review their accomplishments and identify performance errors. They do not allow themselves to be distracted by the victories or failures of others. They concentrate on what they can control and forget the rest. Mental toughness is the key to inoculating yourself against negative stress effects. If you have some influence over the outcome, focus on the solution and if not, put your energy into more productive activity.

When we perceive events as stressful, whatever the source, our body releases a stress hormone called cortisol. High levels of cortisol can result in a number of undesirable health effects including diabetes and heart attack. The effects of cortisol are cumulative and one of the best ways to lower cortisol is to exercise. It is a common myth that exercise drains energy. In fact, it releases it. If you are pushed for time, three weekly sessions of 20-30 minute aerobic activity such as cycling, jogging or rowing will render significant health benefits.

We work with participants on Cranfield's General Management Programmes to help them develop a clear understanding of the balance between psychological and physical performance factors in order to improve their business contribution and optimise performance gain. Achieving this balance is not always easy but in the long term, it is fundamental to using pressure to best effect. 

For further information about Cranfield's General Management Programmes visit: www.cranfield.ac.uk/som/gmdp or contact Sara Shakespeare on +44 (0)1234 754569