

Developing Your “Inner Game”

The growth of coaching over the past 20 years has brought new awareness to what it takes to be successful in today's challenging and changing training environments. One of the major learnings is that helping key people to develop their “Inner Game” is essential to success.

The “Outer Game” of any activity has to do with its behavioral and environmental aspects. In sports, this involves the physical aspects related playing the game and using the equipment (tennis racket, skis, ball, bat, mitt, etc.). In a business environment, this has to do with applying the tools and implementing the procedures necessary to accomplish mission critical tasks and compete effectively in the marketplace.

The “Inner Game” has to do with your mental and emotional approach to what you are doing. This includes your attitude, belief in yourself and your team, your ability to concentrate effectively, deal with mistakes and pressure, and so on. The concept of the “Inner Game” was developed by Timothy Gallwey (1974, 2000) as a way of helping people to achieve excellence in various sports (e.g., tennis, golf, skiing, etc.), music and also business and management training. Success in any area of performance involves using your mind together with your body. Preparing yourself mentally and emotionally to perform well is the essence of your “Inner Game.”

When your Outer Game and Inner Game are working together, actions flow with a type of effortless excellence that is called, “playing in the zone.” Some indicators that you are focused and in “the zone” are:

- A feeling of confidence and the absence of anxiety and self-doubt
- A sense of “humble authority” – self-confidence without arrogance
- No fear of failure or self-consciousness about achieving your goals
- A focus on performing beautifully and excellently
- A state of relaxed readiness in the body and focused spaciousness in the mind
- Performance comes without effort and without having to think about it

The opposite of this state – anxiety, lack of confidence, low energy, fear, stress, mental paralysis – are responsible for many difficulties and challenges in the training environment. To put it another way, *limitations in people limit their performance.*

Physical practice is what builds the skills of your Outer Game and puts them into “muscle memory” so you don't have to think about it during the game. Similarly, there are mental and somatic exercises can help you to improve your Inner Game.

The Power of Presence

Presence is a key element of the “inner game”. Merriam-Webster's dictionary defines *presence* as “a quality of poise and effectiveness that enables a performer to achieve a close relationship with his or her audience.” The abilities to be poised, effective and achieve a close connection to those with whom we are interacting are important resources for coaches, trainers, managers and professional communicators of all types.

As the definition above implies, poise and connectedness come from the capacity to be present, centered in yourself and in relationship with those around you. The quality of presence is frequently the “difference that makes the difference” in our ability to enjoy life, collaborate generatively and contribute to the growth and transformation of others. Presence is associated with feelings of aliveness, connection, creativity, satisfaction and flow. When we are not present and are disconnected from ourselves and others, we can feel empty, out of control, distant and unavailable.

Transformational teacher Richard Moss points out that the distance between ourselves and others is precisely the distance between ourselves and ourselves. This implies that the way we relate to others and to the world around us is a mirror for how we relate to ourselves. It is from this fundamental relationship with ourselves that our relationships with others and the external world emerge. This self-to-self relationship is frequently limited by those feelings that we don't know how to meet, accept, hold and love in ourselves.

When people are each connected to themselves and present with each other, the natural feelings that emerge are compassion, empathy, genuine interest in each other, spontaneity, authenticity and joy. These feelings are the foundation for all effective personal and professional relationships.

COACHing Versus CRASHing

It is said that things are always changing, but not always progressing. Along our identity journey, many challenges will present themselves such as meeting the fear of the unknown and the unfamiliar, dealing with loss or separation, and a general sense of uncertainty and vulnerability. These can plunge us into unhelpful survival strategies: attack, escape or rigidity (fight, flight, freeze). This might result in regression, inertia, ambivalence, the difficulty of letting go, confusion and conflict.

When this happens we are likely to collapse into a stuck state that can be summarized by the letters in the word CRASH:

Contraction

Reaction

Analysis Paralysis

Separation

Hurt and Hatred

In order to progress through change, it is important to cultivate qualities such as flexibility and stability, balance, connection and the ability to let go. This comes from being centered and in your “inner zone of excellence” and connected with something beyond the confines of our egos. These processes are characterized by what we call the COACH state:

Centered

Open

Attending with Awareness

Conected

Holding

It is important to have practices that help to create and strengthen the COACH state so that we may move through and accompany others through times of challenge and change. It is easy to stay balanced when life moves smoothly, but in order to maintain equilibrium during turbulent times, one must have developed these qualities until they are “in the muscle”. Preparing for your Hero's Journey requires durable practices to prepare you for moving through times of challenge and change with resourcefulness.

Opening the COACH Channel

For each element of the COACH state explore the following steps:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how do you experience it now?
2. What can you do to increase it just a little bit more? (i.e., physical, verbal, visual, reference, experience, role model, acting “as if”, etc.)
3. What level it is now?
4. What difference does it make? What becomes possible now?