

Head Games: The Use of Mental Rehearsal to Improve Performance



In a Nutshell

Mental rehearsal of performances is an excellent way to support skill development. *LeaderLetter* subscribers have told me that they've found mental rehearsal useful for job interviews, presentations, cheerleading performances, athletic performances, sales calls and teaching. There are numerous opportunities to use mental rehearsal to master managerial behaviors too.

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Is Imagined Practice More Helpful Than Actual Practice?

In the photo above, Tasha Butts is executing one of the toughest shots in the sport of basketball, and mentally rehearsing such a performance beforehand can be very helpful. Butts is a guard on the University of Tennessee's basketball team. Sunday night, in the last second of Tennessee's post-season tournament game against Baylor, Butts was sent to the free throw line with a chance to win the game. There was a lot of pressure on her to perform. If she failed, her team might well have been eliminated from the tournament. Such pressure makes free throw shooting at the end of a basketball game very difficult. Butts succeeded and Tennessee defeated Baylor.

How should we prepare for difficult performances in athletics, the workplace, or other situations? Research has found that a combination of "imagined practice" and actual practice often results in better performances than those achieved with preparation that relies solely on actual practice. In addition to athletics, studies have shown that imagined practice improves performance in diverse contexts that include communication, education and clinical and counseling psychology.¹

A Managerial Example: Visualizing Supportive Communication

Here's an example of how a manager could use mental rehearsal to improve her management skills: Morgan was scheduled to meet with Whitney, one of her staff members, at 2:00 to discuss the performance review she gave him. She expected the discussion to be difficult, because Whitney has consistently demonstrated a self-serving bias in how he perceives his performance. Last year when they met to discuss his performance review, Whitney raised some concerns about the scores that he received, and he put Morgan on the defensive. She started to argue with him. Arguing with Whitney was counterproductive, because it caused negative feelings and lingering conflict. This time, Morgan wanted to use her [effective listening](#) skills. Mental rehearsal before the meeting can help.

At 1:50, Morgan stopped what she was working on and spent a few minutes mentally rehearsing possible exchanges between Whitney and herself. She visualized Whitney raising objections about his performance review and imagined herself listening carefully, paraphrasing back to Whitney what she understood his concerns to be and probing for additional information. She also visualized herself tactfully explaining that she had a different perception of his performance, and clarifying for Whitney what her expectations were for her staff members. Morgan imagined that her efforts to listen to Whitney, even though she couldn't always agree with him, helped to keep him from becoming argumentative and baiting her into a quarrel. She visualized herself summing up their conversation at the end, and discussing the steps Whitney can take to improve his performance. Finally, she imagined herself standing up, smiling and very professionally shaking Whitney's hand as their meeting came to a close.

When Whitney walked in at 2:00, Morgan felt confident and prepared. As they began to go over the performance review and Whitney raised some objections, Morgan tactfully listened and responded in much the same way she did during her mental rehearsal. As expected, showing Whitney that she was listening to him helped contain the level of tension between them. Even though Whitney walked away thinking that his scores should have been more favorable, he wasn't angry like he was last year after going through the process with Morgan. Mental rehearsal improved Morgan's performance!

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What Mental Rehearsal Is and Why It Works

Mental rehearsal involves imagined, mental practice of performing a task as opposed to actual practice. That is, when engaging in mental rehearsal, one imagines performing without having to actually do anything. (Insert your favorite consultant or management professor joke here.)

As the saying goes, "Practice makes perfect." Yes, practice can cause improvement, but "perfect practice" can lead to better results than practice full of failures. Because mental practice is perfect practice, it is also a confidence-booster. Experiencing success increases confidence, even if that experience is imagined.

Basketball fans recognize the old cliché that goes something like, "Free throw shooting is 90% mental, 10% physical." It's true that a major determinant of a free throw shooter's success is his or her mental activity before taking a shot and through the process of shooting (I'm not sure about those percentages though). Focus and concentration are very helpful. Accordingly, mental practice seems to assist mental preparation for the process of shooting a free throw.

A limitation, of course, is that one also has to have a certain degree of knowledge and skill for performing the activity in order to be successful. My 7-year-old can't make a free throw no matter how much time he spends mentally practicing, because he still lacks the strength to do so. Mental practice should supplement other forms of skill development, not replace them. For instance, role playing effective listening skills and getting feedback on performances helps to develop those skills in ways that mental rehearsal cannot. Nonetheless, mental practice assists the skill learning process and provides the extra edge for those who have reached sufficient levels of skill development.

We experience stress when we perceive threats or opportunities that we fear we cannot handle effectively, and mental rehearsal helps us cope with stress. First, as I mentioned, mental practice improves self-confidence, so we can reduce our stress by visualizing ourselves successfully dealing with our challenges. Second, relaxation is often a part of mental rehearsal exercises, and relaxation helps reduce stress.

The following procedure integrates the relaxation and the preparation features. Free throw shooters usually get just a few seconds to visualize successful performance, but they still find visualization helpful. More elaborate mental rehearsal, like the following, is even more useful.

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A Mental Rehearsal Procedure²

1. Find a time and place where you won't be interrupted.
2. Recline or lie down, and close your eyes.
3. Relax, concentrate, and focus. Take deep breaths and exhale slowly. As you exhale, imagine that stress is leaving your body. Start at your feet ... feel all the stress leave your feet ... then your legs ... then your

chest ... all the way to the top of your head ... feel all the stress leave your body. Free your mind of distractions and allow your mind to focus on the relaxation process.

4. Once relaxed, focus on the specific challenging task.
5. Mentally tell yourself that you are confident and that you have the ability to perform this task successfully. Repeatedly tell yourself, with confidence, that you will be successful.
6. Imagine what you will see just before you begin the task. Visualize yourself as an active participant, not as a passive observer. For example, to mentally rehearse putting a golf ball, imagine that you are standing on the green rather than watching yourself from the gallery.
7. Remaining relaxed and focused, mentally rehearse successful performance of this task. Imagine going through the process and seeing successful results.
8. Repeat step 7 several times.
9. Finally, open your eyes and smile. You have successfully performed in your mind, which is great preparation for actual performance. You should now be confident that you will perform successfully in the real situation. Remember to praise yourself for being successful. Self-reinforcement is another a key to self-motivation.

In Summary ...

The mental rehearsal techniques that many of us have learned to help us perform in sports, on a stage or in some other context can also help us perform challenging tasks in the workplace. By reducing stress and boosting confidence, mental rehearsal can help us succeed!

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Notes

1. Neck, C. P., Nouri, H., Godwin, J. L. (2003). How self-leadership affects the goal-setting process. *Human Resource Management Review*, 13(4): 691-707.
2. Based on Manz, C. C., & Neck, C. P. (1999). *Mastering self-leadership: Empowering yourself for personal excellence*, (2nd ed.), pp. 70-71. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

About the Photo

AP Photo/L.M. Otero: e-mailed to me from *Yahoo! News*; news.yahoo.com.

Other Sources

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- Whetten, D. A., & Cameron, K. S. (2002). *Developing management skills*, (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sooin College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

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E-mail Your Comments

Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **I learn a lot from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

A Good, Clean Joke

An elementary school teacher starts a new job at a school in Durham, North Carolina. In an attempt to make a good impression on her first day, she explains to her class that she's a Duke Blue Devils fan. She asks the class to raise their hands if they too are Duke fans. Everyone in the class raises their hand except one little girl.

The teacher, looking a little surprised, asks: "Hannah, why didn't you raise your hand?"

"Because I'm not a Duke fan," she replied.

The teacher asked, "Well, if you're not a Duke fan, then who do you support?"

"I'm a Wright State Raider fan, and proud of it," Hannah replied.

"Really?" The teacher, now becoming interested in the lone dissenter, asks, "Hannah, why are you a Raider fan?"

"Because my Dad is a Raider fan and my Mom is a Raider fan, so I'm a Raider fan."

"Well," said the teacher, "that doesn't mean you have to be a Raider fan. Kids don't have to be just like their parents. What if your Mom was a liar and your Dad was a crook, what would you be then?"

Hannah said, "I'd be a Duke fan."

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