

STAYING

RESILIENT

Tips for Sustaining High-Level Performance Under Pressure

BY GRAHAM JONES

The economic climate has rocked the legal sector. In recent months, law firms from small local practices to urban megafirms have seen tightened budgets, reduced deal activity, billing and compensation rates frozen

to 2008 levels, equity partners injecting more finance into the firms, layoffs from partner level to support staff, and delays in implementing new hires. This is pressure indeed for lawyers at all stages of their careers.

The ability to cope with what can seem like overwhelming change has never been more important. How should you handle it? The first thing to realize is that you're not alone. Pressure is an inherent and incessant part of the modern business world.

Pressure, though, does extraordinary things to people. It can crush performance in sometimes unexplainable ways, or it can induce extraordinarily high performance. The key to being able to flourish under pressure is the development of mental toughness.

Mental toughness is the capacity to respond positively to multiple, and sometimes conflicting, pressures in order to consistently perform at high levels. Here are pointers on how to develop and strengthen the core skills that underpin this capacity.

Learning Techniques for Handling Pressure

Being mentally tough does not mean that you never feel stressed under pressure. On the contrary, everyone experiences stress at various times. The key is accepting that it is an inevitable part of performing at high levels so you can then develop skills for handling the pressure. Research with the world's top athletes shows that they can continue to produce their best performances at times of significant physical and emotional pressure because they have learned how to cope with the stress and maintain composure in such circumstances. Legal professionals can develop the same types of skills to respond to pressures ranging from incessant client demands, to the race for partnership, to the tough task of getting new business in a down economy.

Here are techniques that can be used to handle stressors effectively.

■ **REFRAMING NEGATIVE THOUGHTS.** The starting point is the realization and acceptance that you have a choice about the way you think and that you can alter your mode of thinking. Catastrophizing, overgeneralizing and taking things personally are all negative thought patterns that, once identified, can be addressed and reframed into more constructive and positive modes of thinking.

■ **MANAGING THE SYMPTOMS OF STRESS.** Stress can result in both behavioral and physical symptoms that are often difficult to manage. Relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing, visualizing soothing imagery and taking meditation breaks, are extremely helpful in controlling these symptoms. It is also vital to identify physical factors that exacerbate symptoms of stress. For example, if you fail to get enough sleep, drink too much caffeine, or don't eat properly during difficult situations, problems can be more intense.

■ **IDENTIFYING THE THINGS YOU CANNOT CONTROL.** There are some things that are out of an individual's control. Accepting this as a fact of life allows one to control the amount and the nature of the pressure one feels from conflicting sources. Frequently, though, people make the mistake of believing that many of their workplace issues and performance targets are out of their control. These are often assumptions that,

with the right approach, can be challenged so that you can exert as much control as possible to reduce stress.

Staying Strong in Your Self-Belief

Self-belief is an essential element in the makeup of the world's best performers in business, sports and more. It underpins the ability to set and achieve stretch goals, take risks, control potentially debilitating fear, and learn from mistakes—all of which are key components of successful lawyering.

Robust self-belief enables you to maintain confidence in your ability to achieve performance goals under pressure. Here are some strategies to try.

■ **HIGHLIGHTING YOUR SKILLS AND ABILITIES.** These are the reasons you have risen to where you are in life, although in tough times people sometimes overlook the many accomplishments they have achieved thus far. Listing out your skills and the tangible achievements that have resulted from them highlights evidence of your professional and personal successes. These can then serve as building blocks for strengthening belief in one's self.

■ **TRULY BELIEVING THAT YOU CAN ACHIEVE YOUR GOALS.** Goals that are both realistic and appropriately stretching motivate you to achieve your performance expectations. But it's also important to focus on the individual steps that will lead to each goal, as focusing solely on the ultimate outcome only adds to pressure. For example, reaching partnership may be the ultimate outcome goal, but component goals like building up your book of business and developing your leadership skills are fundamental to the process of rising in your firm as well. Step-

by-step goals allow you to perform well and also understand that you are indeed achieving things even if the outcome goal is not reached.

Maintaining Focus on What Matters

Top performers are a testament to the ability to deal effectively with many potential distractions while maintaining focus on the things that matter. This ability involves accepting that there are factors in the performance environment you cannot influence so that, as discussed earlier, you can focus on the things you can control. But it also involves the following.

■ **FOCUSING ON PROCESSES.** High-level performance is about getting the process right. Accordingly, the key is to keep your sights targeted on the processes involved in performing well in the matter at hand, like the steps necessary to close a given type of deal, rather than seeing only the actual completed project. Focusing on the process will allow the outcome to take care of itself.

■ **FOCUSING ON THE POSITIVES.** If external distractions are not enough to disrupt focus, then internal ones often lurk menacingly. Thoughts of past failures, doubts about the ability to achieve current goals, or thoughts of the consequences of not closing today's deal are all negative thoughts that hinder performance. Focusing on personal strengths and the positive aspects of your role right now helps to maintain focus on what matters so you can realize your performance potential.

Making Your Motivation Work for You

Ultimately, skills and abilities alone will not enable high performance that

is sustainable under protracted challenges. The mentally tough are able to bounce back because they continue to stay *motivated* despite sustained pressures. Extrinsic motivation, such as pay and reward, is unquestionably a source of motivation for many. But research shows that internal motivation and working for an inherent satisfaction leads to more enjoyment and consequently less pressure.

This ensures that desire and determination to succeed is founded on positive and constructive motives that keep you optimally motivated and enable you to recover from inevitable performance setbacks and failures that may threaten your longer-term goals. Life in the dynamic and unpredictable legal sector means that sometimes things will not go according to plan but, in order to succeed, individuals must be motivated and able to sustain performance during times of stress.

So, the bottom line on those who remain motivated and thus thrive under sustained pressure is this: They do things because they want to succeed at them. Or put differently, they are energized and exhilarated by what they do, rather than being desperate to succeed because they fear the consequences of failure. If you focus on the things you can control, what really matters in the job at hand, and all the positive aspects of your role rather than the negatives and constant pressures, you too can develop a level of mental toughness that will enable you to sustain high performance even in the face of today's challenges. ^{1P}

Graham Jones, PhD, is a performance psychologist and Director of Lane4, a management consultancy specializing in organizational performance, leadership development and executive coaching with offices in the U.S., Europe and Asia. He is coauthor of *Developing Mental Toughness: Gold Medal Strategies for Enhancing Your Business Performance* (Spring Hill, 2008).