

OPTIMISING YOUR OWN PERFORMANCE

ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND HOW TO FIND OUT MORE

This document is the work of Ashley Bookman, CEO and Founder of Momentum Incorporated. Ashley is a business problem solver committed to improving the health, performance and profitability of the organisations he works with, as well developing and enabling individuals to reach their true potential.

The content represents years of practical research and understanding about the profound connection between our self-esteem and our ability to evolve into our best self. The content forms part of the first in a series of one day workshops which show how you can evolve your mind, optimise your own performance and progressively contribute more to others and to the planet we share.

If you would like to learn more or if you are interested to attend the next 'Optimising Your Own Performance' Programme please contact Momentum's Director of Programmes: tom.francis@momentumgb.com or you can reach Tom on 07921 861116.

The quality of the feedback you give inevitably influences the way people respond to it. The quality of the observation and the delivery style affects both their ability to change their behaviour and their capacity to maintain or improve their self-confidence. And you will probably have noticed how you yourself are inclined to see or implement feedback from others depending on who they are and the way the feedback is given.

It is easy to think of feedback as something which you give to, and receive from, other people. In practice the familiar notion that feedback is exchanged between colleagues fails to recognise an equally powerful source of feedback - the feedback which we give to ourselves. Whether we are consciously aware of it or not we all have an attitude towards ourselves which is, to varying degrees, either self-critical or self-supportive. This attitude affects our internal dialogue (self-talk) which in turn impacts on our self-esteem, our self-confidence and our performance both inside and outside work.

This document shows how different mindsets and mental habits have a profound effect on your self-esteem, your performance and your future potential. It demonstrates why, if you are interested to achieve your potential, it becomes necessary to pay regular attention to four interrelated areas of your personal development:

1. Self-Awareness
2. Self-Acceptance
3. Self-Appreciation
4. Self-Discipline

DEVELOPING GENERAL SELF-AWARENESS

Self-awareness is a primary and necessary component of building your performance. If you are not even aware of areas to upgrade, how can you possibly improve them? At the same time you can see that if you ask yourself the question, “How self-aware am I?” it presents something of a challenge because inevitably we don’t know what we don’t know. So it can be tricky to answer the question, “How self-aware am I?” with any accuracy at all. 😊

Here are a few questions which you can use to raise your self-awareness:

1. How motivated am I to develop self-awareness?
2. To what extent do I welcome feedback from others?
3. How much of the time am I acting in a conscious way?

Choosing More Self-Awareness

Some people lack the motivation to develop self-awareness simply because they are absorbed in day-to-day life. They simply haven't given much thought to their behaviour or personal qualities, and they haven't realised the extent to which different mindsets and behaviour can transform their performance and sense of wellbeing. As a result they evolve without focus and due to lack of awareness, often wake up to their own contribution to a problem when, apart from offering an apology, it is a little late to do anything about it.

If you lack motivation or find yourself resistant to looking at your own performance it might be because you fear that you will find something you do, or even the kind of person you are, unattractive or unacceptable. It is easy to see that low motivation inhibits any possible progress, and when motivation or self-discipline rise you achieve better results with less effort.

Developing greater self-awareness helps you get a better, more realistic perspective on yourself and allows you to prioritise what's really important to you. If you so choose it also enables you to deliver better on what is most significant to others around you. This in turn means that the results you get, and even the kind of life you lead, is something which you have actively chosen yourself. Understanding how to optimise your own performance means you get much more satisfaction out of life as you are given the opportunity to celebrate small or bigger progress steps along the way.

Throughout this document I will outline different mindsets and mental habits which you can use to develop your self-awareness. The question is, "Is that something you are interested to do?"

Maximising Your Awareness with Feedback from Others?

Perhaps the primary inhibitor of development of self-awareness is defensiveness against feedback from others. If feedback makes you feel defensive it can be tempting to:

1. Ignore it
2. Pretend that there is no truth in it (denial)
3. Look for counter-examples to the feedback
4. Jump to attack the person back

A more generalised defence mechanism is when people make out that they are doing pretty well in all areas and are regularly heard repeating how well they are doing. As a result people who have to listen to this kind of talk instinctively decide that if someone is so busy self-promoting there is little point in giving any feedback at all.

Do you recognise any of these defensive tendencies in yourself?

Our defensive reactions are designed to protect us from negative emotions and we all engage in defensive habits at one time or another. Sadly defensiveness isn't such a great feeling itself so it fails to achieve its intended purpose. The problem is compounded because it also serves to block us from any chance of making useful progress as a result of the incoming feedback and so we tend to become unhelpfully locked at a certain stage of achieving our potential.

Most of us are especially prone to become defensive when we feel misunderstood or misjudged. We find being misunderstood, especially by those we value, very painful. And this discomfort leads us either to withdraw or become aggressive – neither of which facilitate intelligent conversations which might clarify any misunderstandings or help us see something which sits hidden in one of our blind spots. Overcoming your defensive reactions means that you will find it easier to make the progress which will give you satisfaction and happiness in the longer term.

When you find yourself responding defensively there are a few things you can do:

Remember That Misjudgments are an Everyday Occurrence

Most people are surprised at just how often people misjudge one another and *we are often unaware of the extent to which we misjudge others*. No one is pleased to find out that they 'got it wrong' so we often fail to see our misjudgment or we blame the other person and don't want to admit that the error is ours.

If you can really absorb the simple truth that misunderstandings and misjudgments are incredibly common, rather than defending you will be able to ask the question, "What makes you think that?"

Getting someone to answer the "What makes you think that?" question means that you can begin to understand whether:

- a) the conclusion they came to is as a result of a misunderstanding or
- b) there is in fact some truth in the accusation

Being able to enter into an open dialogue (without defensiveness) is key to understanding how the misunderstanding developed and equally how you can improve your performance.

Separate the Delivery Style of the Comment from its Content

When you feel attacked the natural reaction is either to retreat or to retaliate but in reality there is a third option which tends to be far more useful. The third option is to actively look for any sign of truth in the accusation. In order to find this truth you will need to learn to separate the style of someone's feedback from the content. This simply means separating out any criticism or sarcasm and thinking through where the truth lies in the words used and their meaning.

Style – aggressive or passive words, behaviour or tone of voice

Content – the meaning of what is being said

For most people this is no mean feat because the attacking style of delivery causes the defensive feelings and this effectively de-couples us from our thinking ability. This de-coupling is unhelpful because it comes at a time when we most need to use our minds to make an objective assessment of what is being said. It is quite a discipline to ignore the incompetent delivery style and to look for the truth in the content of the incoming comment. But this ability to *look for the truth in any accusation* is profoundly key to your ongoing progress – it eventually becomes the best possible antidote for discomfort caused when feedback is clumsily delivered or when you are feeling misunderstood. Suddenly rather than just feeling defensive you can be proactive and find insights which progress or improve a situation, should you choose to do so.

Use the Accusation to Make More Progress

Even if you think that you have been misunderstood and the person is mistaken in their assessment, you can still make a great deal of progress if you imagine that there is truth in the other person's perception. Although this is quite a counter-intuitive attitude, learning to look at your behaviour in this objective way means that you can remain open-minded to the possibility of making an improvement instead of shutting down to your own development.

If you can stay open-minded you will find that almost any comment can be used to make progress when you use the accusation as a filter for your performance. For example if you are accused of 'being lazy' and on that occasion there is no evidence that you were lazy, you will probably find other times or different contexts when you could be more proactive or focussed.

If you practise these simple principles you will soon be able to ask yourself useful questions like, “Why did I receive feedback about that behaviour rather than any other?” and, “Where is the truth in what this person is saying?”

This more proactive attitude to feedback means that you will be able to use any comment you hear as a window through which you can see your own performance more clearly and so make greater progress.

Developing Self-Awareness in the Present

So far I have referred to the wider aspects self-awareness and focussed on how to develop awareness of your typical habits and personal tendencies. There is another form of self-awareness which is equally significant – your ability to be aware of what you are doing as you are doing it.

Acting instinctively often means that we fail to recognise the possible implications of our actions and this leads to unintended consequences. The more awareness you develop the more purposeful you can become, realising in any given moment how your behaviour or passivity will impact on other people and the situation overall.

Developing this type of self-awareness is not as complicated as it might seem. If you have ever wanted to get better at a sport you will have paid attention to your technique and practised consciously for at least some of the time when you play. Over time you develop the self-awareness to predict the outcome of your technique, you instinctively feel when things are going well and when there is room for improvement. Developing self-awareness just involves raising your consciousness in the same way whenever you want to perform better in a particular situation.

Raising your awareness means just that – raising your awareness. It doesn't involve self-criticism it just involves noticing what you are doing and the way you are doing it. If you find that you are still too self-critical then the practices for self-acceptance will be of use to you.

SELF-ACCEPTANCE

For those of us who are driven to succeed, the search for self-improvement is a permanent part of our personality make-up. Perhaps surprisingly this positive drive to achieve is often actually due to low self-acceptance – we are reluctant to believe that what we have done is of an acceptable standard. On a good day whatever we have achieved might just do for now, but the feeling that our performance, or even the type of person we are, is ‘still not quite good enough’ returns pretty quickly.

And this 'not good enough feeling' is what drives us to improve our next effort or achieve our next target. So there are positive implications of low self-acceptance, as it is perhaps the most common source of motivation for our future achievements.

But there are two sides to self-acceptance and the other one is not so positive at all. Low self-acceptance is far less helpful when it causes us to berate ourselves for any sub-optimal performance. Often without even realising it *we give ourselves intense criticism which we would find completely unacceptable if we received it from others*. This internal criticism is just as damaging as the criticism which we wouldn't tolerate from colleagues or 'friends'. Once out of control, rather than improving our performance, it only serves to harm our confidence and inhibits our willingness to try things out. Rather than helping us improve it tends to have a paralysing effect.

As this internal self-criticism is often unconscious it can easily get out of control and habituate into a default condition – which many people experience as an ever present and undermining jibe. This constant fault-finding is profoundly harmful to both our self-image and self-confidence. When self-criticism reaches these levels it is *the key inhibitor* to optimising our performance.

In these circumstances people often judge performance even before they have had enough practice time to make an assessment of their potential. In his book about top performers Malcolm Gladwell suggested that we need 10,000 hours to master a particular skill yet many of us subject ourselves to heavy self-criticism in the first one!

Here are three questions which shed light on some common causes of self-criticism:

1. How long is it before you begin to criticise yourself for not doing better at a new sport or hobby?

It is usual to see someone perform well and because it often looks easy, think you can do it just like that. In reality you are discounting several hours of effort a day or week for many years to make it look so effortless.

2. How self-critical are you when you can think of an improvement to something you said in a meeting or interview?

Even if you accept that optimising your athletic potential takes years most people discount how many repetitions it takes to get just about anything to a good standard. For example when you write an email you can often see ways to improve it and make those improvements

without criticism – but for some strange reason when you *say* a sentence it should be right first time.

3. How often do you compare yourself with others and find that they are more competent than you are?

Many people undermine their own best performance by unhelpful comparisons. This comparative habit is often skewed because we are inclined to focus our comparisons on our skill gaps. Although some comparison can be really useful to set performance direction, many people only use it to prove their own sense of inadequacy. Why would you do that?

You can see that these self-critical habits can only be maintained if we discount several relevant and significant factors. Happily our over-critical tendencies can be reversed - you can make the transition from self-criticism to self-support. In order to achieve this more productive mindset you will learn to think about your performance differently and learn some new mental habits:

Make a Conscious Decision to Become Your Own Best Ally

As you already know misjudgments by those who are close to us are far more painful than those whose opinions are less significant. What is significant is that regardless of the source of the criticisms if you focus on them for too long they will prove harmful to you.

Few of us set out to be purposefully harmful, and when that's the case it is normally because it's the only way we know to have a feeling of triumph or success. This *one-upmanship is really a clue that own self-esteem is way below par* and as self-esteem builds it becomes progressively less necessary to stabilise it at someone else's expense. When our self-esteem has strengthened most people feel disappointed if they think of times when they have disadvantaged others.

If you think about the term 'self-esteem', it literally means the esteem in which we hold ourselves. Living in a way which disappoints us means that we cannot hold ourselves in high self-esteem

In many ways this document is specifically designed to assist you in progressively building your self-esteem and one key step is to make the decision to learn to live at peace with yourself. If you think about it most of the people in your life are transitory. Friendships are formed and then we often move on, our relationships with our spouses and relatives change over time, children grow up and leave

home and most people outlive their parents. *But the one person who you will wake up with every day of your life is yourself* – so the person with whom you need the best, most consistent and supportive relationship is you.

Keep making the Identity / Behaviour distinction

A key component of developing healthy self-acceptance is to make a clear distinction between your identity and your behaviour.

Identity – who you are

Behaviour – what you do

Deepak Chopra, another best selling author said, “We are human beings not human doings”. This simple sentence is really worth thinking about. Realising that your identity is who you are and your behaviour is what you do is perhaps the most significant distinction you can make when seeking to optimise your behaviour.

If the distinction between identity and behaviour is unfamiliar to you, you will probably need to make it many times before it really starts to take hold. But, once it does you will find that it provides a fundamental shift in your mindset because it opens the door for you to accept yourself and still make significant and useful changes in your behaviour. Greater self-acceptance and self-appreciation will improve your self-esteem. With stronger self-esteem you will be able to look more and more objectively at how to change your behaviour to achieve better results. As you learn to practise without self-criticism you become progressively more able to achieve your potential.

Develop Supportive Internal Dialogue

Here are a number of things you can do to make your internal dialogue more user friendly:

1. Rather than berating yourself you can ask yourself, “Did I make that mistake on purpose?” You can decide that *only if you find you were negatively intended* should you really take yourself to account. Otherwise you can re-focus on developing the self-awareness and self-discipline which will deliver the required up-grade.

2. Realise that your accumulated mistakes provide the foundation for future progress. You will have realised that it is often necessary to make many mistakes on the road to success. As long as you maintain focus on the standard you are seeking to achieve, it is realistic and intelligent to see your mistakes as a key and productive part of the achievement process.
3. Exchange the critical self-talk for statements of self-acceptance – write down the comments which you use when you are feeling self-critical and then design your own personalised alternatives. For example, if you find yourself saying, “Why can’t I get anything right!” you can convert it to, “I should practise that more often” or, “I wonder if there’s a better way to do this?” At first you may need to say those expressions in a mechanistic way to get them up and running in your mind. After a while you will probably become more aware of your negative self-talk and be able to edit it to provide yourself with self-supportive comments quite instinctively.

Habituating any new skill takes time and practice, and exchanging one technique for another typically involves more conscious effort than learning a new skill from scratch. But if you prioritise making the transition from self-criticism to self-support it will impact on every other area of your performance. You are likely to find that raising your performance will become so much more enjoyable and that your mood will lighten day by day.

SELF-APPRECIATION

You have already seen the connection between low self-esteem and defensiveness and how self-acceptance is a key part of releasing defensive tendencies. Yet even when people can accept their current skill levels they often find that their self-esteem could be much better. This remaining lack of self-esteem often exists (unless we are falsely ‘bigging ourselves up’) if our natural tendency is to focus on what we can improve, what is below standard and things we find unattractive in ourselves.

Even when it is not critical, constant internal messaging about what we think ‘could be improved’ means that we tend to develop a very skewed view of ourselves. If you only see the negatives and discount the improvements already made it is likely to have an adverse effect on your spirits.

Here are a couple of things you can do to begin building your capacity for self-appreciation:

Have Mini-Celebrations

Acceptance and appreciation are not the same – acceptance tends to be passive, appreciation is much more active. Self-appreciation can involve tiny celebrations of progress made or the demonstration of some basic goodness. You can offer yourself these mini-celebrations many times every single day. Parking your car well in a small space, remembering something you often forget, tidying or cleaning, doing something you've procrastinated about or small acts of kindness are all examples where you can let yourself know that 'you made a good job of that'. These mini-celebrations have a cumulative effect so if you make them a habit you increase your sense of well being.

Even when things aren't going so well in life you can use your self-appreciation to keep you progressing towards a better place, this might involve adjusting the demands you place on yourself. When we are going through a bad patch our self-esteem inevitably takes a tumble, and when our self-esteem is low we feel more needy. *This neediness often leads us to be more small minded than we would like, we lose any sense of generosity and hold onto things as though they are in short supply. Small mindedness initiates a downward spiral, it unconsciously reinforces the sense of neediness which in turn makes us even more small minded. But the spiral is reversible, each time you take action to reverse the trend it is like putting a deposit in your self-esteem bank. This means that even if you start with an overdraft balance, continuing to put in credits will eventually turn the situation around. As far as I can tell the more spacious and generous you are in thought and action the quicker the recovery happens. All generous actions can be used for mini-celebrations.*

So far I have suggested that having mini-celebrations for small actions can be a useful way to improve morale and build a better connection with yourself. In many ways the mini-celebrations serve the purpose of maintaining your mood and progress in life. But a more profound sense of well being is achieved through celebrating your personal qualities.

Celebrate Your Personal Qualities

Larger celebrations are due when you appreciate your positive qualities. Few would argue that being kind, generous, honest, thoughtful and compassionate are all qualities that we can be impressed by. These qualities are the ones which reverse the small mindedness which occurs when we feel needy. So whilst on the face of it when we act with any of these qualities we are contributing to the benefit of others, in reality we are also simultaneously contributing to ourselves.

Celebration Choices

Those are not the only celebratable qualities, you can decide which qualities you want to celebrate. Maybe determination and persistence appeal, maybe light-heartedness and humour or maybe maintaining your composure in an intense situation is something which will inspire you. You can choose what you want to celebrate right now.

You will probably find that as with any other fashion your choices change over time. But at least as important as what you choose to celebrate, is the fact that you make sure that your appreciations keep flowing. They are the anti-dote to criticism and are a key source of good spirits. Good spirits give you the enthusiasm to continue your improving journey.

SELF-DISCIPLINE

Although self-discipline is the last on the list of four components for optimising your performance, it is at least as significant as the other three. If you have self-awareness, self-acceptance and self-appreciation you will almost certainly feel better in yourself – but without self-discipline your ability to optimise your performance remains significantly impaired.

Many people use a lack of self-discipline as a way to undermine their best efforts to achieve their potential. By being undisciplined they under-perform and so confirm some original belief that they are not a clever, competent or successful person. So, if you think you could benefit from more self-discipline, a key first step is to make a decision to return to a disciplined approach to life.

Some think of self-discipline as a heavy responsibility, but it doesn't have to be that way. You are likely to have standards which vary according to life's pressures, your spirits on any given day and the amount of reward you have got for your efforts recently. In my mind self-discipline is not about an indiscriminate rigidity which tends to de-humanise us but about your ability and enthusiasm to return to an upward path when you have strayed from it.

Fortunately there is a huge pool of satisfaction which you can draw on if you can develop your ability to get yourself back on track. And implementing good self-discipline provides endless examples which qualify as the small acts which you can use for mini-celebrations. Combining personal discipline and subsequent appreciation for time and effort invested, contribute to a solid foundation for improving performance as well as for the results achieved. You can build on the foundation by using self-awareness – consciousness in the present means that you develop the instinct for improvement.

As I have mentioned before *things tend to go wrong if you confuse self-criticism with self-discipline*, on one level they do have a similar purpose – to maintain standards or to drive them upwards. The primary difference between the two is the attitude you use when maintaining or improving your performance. On the other hand, key to successful self-discipline is the ability make the distinction between supportive internal dialogue and permission to fail. It can be tempting with all the self-support to kid yourself that something which is quite achievable is beyond your grasp.

Perhaps you let whatever it is get out of proportion or discount your abilities and let yourself languish in a place which will only serve to harm both your self-esteem and your performance. At times like these it can be good to use the expression, “Stop being a drip and get a grip”.

Key to maximising progress is making good decisions about when self-acceptance is to be balanced by quite clear self-discipline. You can make a decision to achieve something and keep going until it’s delivered. Some people use this kind of thinking for running marathons or anything else which requires repeated persistence. Nearly everyone who completes the distance talks about the great sense of achievement which accompanies implementing a determined attitude and sticking to a goal.

So optimising your self-discipline is about replacing criticism with determination and making sure that you apply the discipline when you think it’s easier not to bother.

It can be useful to think through what you want to be disciplined about, lots of people attach significance to the image they project to the outside world. The focus on image projection is often a cover for a lack of more basic self-esteem. It’s just another distraction to get people to focus on the image rather than the disarray which lies beneath. Being tidy and maintaining standards do contribute to a sense of well being but if you want to optimise your performance you will need to look underneath the image you project and think through how to optimise yourself as a person.

Here are a few disciplines which you will find improve yourself:

Separate Your Behaviour from Your Identity

In the section on self-acceptance you may have seen how useful it can be to hold an unconditionally positive attitude towards yourself even when you make mistakes. But this tendency to confuse your behaviour and your identity can also cause our self-perceptions to become a major constraint. It can be tempting to believe that just because you often think or act in a particular way you are that kind of person – using this mindset will disable your ability to achieve your potential. Supposing for example someone says, “I am a detailed thinker” (a statement about their perceived identity). This self-perception isn’t really accurate – the truth is that they have detailed thinking tendencies. In reality

there is no reason why they shouldn't develop some 'big picture thinking' which is the complementary set of skills.

Over-identifying with your behaviour is likely to lead to a lack of motivation to change. If you believe you are a particular kind of person and that's the end of it, you are unlikely to add to your behavioural range or become a more rounded person. There is a lot of satisfaction to be gained from developing the complementary skill set, for lots of people mastering the counter-intuitive can be the most satisfying of all.

Improve your Say/Do Ratio

Progress is made by actually practising – it is not made by talking or thinking about it. In many cases *talking about it and thinking about it are the procrastination processes* which prevent us from achieving something.

There are counter-examples, for example if you use your mind for some mental rehearsal (running through a good way to do something or thinking how it can be improved) then thinking about it can be productive. If you think that you don't have the best method then talking to someone who can act as a sounding board may help. You will probably know quite instinctively whether you should do more and think and talk less.

Make a decision to do more and think/talk less for just a month. See how your performance improves and if you like the results keep it up.

Accept the Error but Change the Habit

Poor self-discipline is when you know you would be better to do something a particular way but without good reason you find you can't be bothered. This habit tends to lead to poor self-esteem, in a way you are letting yourself down. Sometimes you won't remember the better way until after the mistake has been made. If you want to rebalance your self-esteem an accessible choice is, rather than self-criminalising, just do the better alternative three times. Using this simple process helps build both good performance enhancing habits and good self-esteem.

Prioritise Looking at your Own Performance

When self-acceptance and self-appreciation levels are low, self-esteem falls and people unconsciously look for 'props' to make themselves feel better. One of the most common props is to begin finding

fault with others. Sometimes this fault-finding is verbalised and sometimes it just becomes another form of negative chatter in our minds. Some people have professions which encourage this type of thinking – all teaching or policing roles require us to develop a fault-finding habit. The problem occurs when the critical thinking process becomes habitual, because it leads to an underlying but often unintended sense of criticism in many conversations which impacts on everyone who comes in contact with it.

Even when there is no professional responsibility it's quite easy to fall into the habit of looking critically at the behaviour of others in order to bolster your own self-esteem. Whilst on one level this tendency prevents us from feeling bad about ourselves, it also means that we spend hours criticising other people's performance – time which we could use more profitably looking at how we might improve our own.

A possible self discipline is to make a conscious decision that if you find yourself criticising others you will re-focus on achieving your own results.

If I Find a Flaw in Someone Else's Performance do I try to Find the same Flaw in Myself?

As you will have realised from reading previous paragraphs it can be tempting to become absorbed with fault-finding in others. This tendency enables us to take the moral high ground and so artificially support our self-esteem. Yet in the majority of cases we have the same habits or traits in ourselves that we criticise in others. Sometimes we don't demonstrate them in the same way, or in the same circumstances, but if you look properly you will find signs that we all tend to have the same sub-optimal tendencies. If you bear this simple truth in mind it will assist you in being able to be more accepting of others and more accepting of yourself.

Another Key Piece of the Puzzle

I have been seeking to understand what optimises human performance all of my working life. Progressing and balancing the development of the four key aspects; self-awareness, self-acceptance, self-appreciation and self-discipline means that you can maximise the chance of success in whatever you choose to do. But there is one fundamental question which is central to optimising your development, the question is as significant as all the other aspects of optimising your potential – so it is a question which ideally would be kept right at the forefront of your mind. The question is:

Where I am trying to get to?

This simple question can be applied in any context – you can ask yourself, “Where am I trying to get to?” in your career, in your domestic life and in your development as a human being.

It is so easy to lose perspective and get caught up in life’s details and so lose sight of our bigger picture ambitions and those personal directions which lead us to become worthwhile human beings.

I hope that you have found these pages useful and that they provide a contribution that assists you in achieving your aspirations – wherever you are trying to get to.

