Leading and Managing to Promote a “Challenge” Culture

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Abstract:

There are inextricable links between the psychology of leadership in sport, and the psychology of leadership in business. This commentary draws on two emerging theories within sport psychology, the Theory of Challenge and Threat States in Athletes (TCTSA), and Social Identity Theory (SIT), to uncover how leaders can best manage teams through pressure situations. We posit that social support is vital for successful pressure management due to its influence on the cognitive appraisal of stressful events. But importantly, we also argue that social support is most effective when it is given and received within a group where a strong social identity is present. We relate this research to the behaviors of prominent leaders within sport. We also discuss the implications of these theoretical standpoints in relation to extant and ongoing empirical research.

Introduction

Having consulted and researched within both sport and business settings as psychologists, we now recognize the link between sport and business is more pronounced than we first thought. In our book What Business Can Learn From Sport Psychology (Turner & Barker, 2014[[1]](#endnote-1)), the title speaks to the relationship between the demands of the business environment and the demands of the sport environment, so much so that similar mental skills can be applied to key stakeholders within each context. We promote the use of psychological (mental) skills to enhance what we call “resources” which are vital in important and stressful situations to meet the demands of whatever situation individuals find themselves in, be it business presentations or athletic competition. In addition to helping individual employees develop these important resources, we have also endeavored to help leaders develop their own resources, but more importantly promote resources in their staff or athletes (Turner & Barker, 2013[[2]](#endnote-2)). To align with the stimulus article, we consider how effective management can help individuals fulfill their potential under pressure, and how effective leadership can compliment pressure management.

**EFFECTIVE PRESSURE MANAGEMENT**

One approach we have used in both business and sport is The Theory of Challenge and Threat States in Athletes (TCTSA; Jones, Meijen, McCarthy, & Sheffield, 2009[[3]](#endnote-3)). In short, a challenge state is associated with superior performance in mental and physical performance (Turner, Jones, Sheffield, & Cross, 2012; Turner, Jones, Sheffield, Slater, Barker, & Bell, 2013[[4]](#endnote-4)[[5]](#endnote-5)) and better health outcomes (O’Donovan et al., 2012[[6]](#endnote-6)), compared to a threat state. The TCTSA brought together numerous psychophysiological theories and proposed that when approaching pressure situations individuals engage in a cognitive appraisal process that determines whether they experience a challenge or a threat state (Jones et al., 2009). If an individual appraises sufficient resources to meet the situational demands then a challenge state is evinced. These “resources” comprise self-efficacy (i.e., belief in one’s ability to be successful), perceived control, and achievement goals (approach or avoidance). An individual approaching a stressful situation with high self-efficacy, high perceived control, and a focus on approach goals will experience a challenge state and thus is more likely to fulfill their potential in that situation.

In one of our recent papers (Turner, Jones, Sheffield, Barker, & Coffee, 2014[[7]](#endnote-7)), we showed how challenge states could be promoted by instructing individuals in the right way. For example, facing a 10 meter climbing wall task, those who were encouraged to be confident about the task (high self-efficacy), made aware of the control they had over their performance (high perceived control), and advised to focus on climbing as high as they could (approach goals) rather than not falling off the wall (avoidance goals), showed a challenge state. In essence, this showed that how an individual is managed at that moment before a tough task was able to dictate their reactions and hence has clear implications for leaders and business managers.

For the managers in the stimulus article these resources are important. Pete Carroll talks about “competing against ourselves to be our best” reflecting an approach focus, and mentions the problem of focusing “on something outside ourself” indicating recognition that external and uncontrollable factors are not an appropriate focus. The stimulus article also indicates that Carroll subscribes to John Wooden’s Pyramid of Success in which confidence (self-efficacy) is near the top. If management does indeed “drive the bus to the destination” then it is possible to steer individuals towards a challenge state by ensuring that they approach all pressure events with high confidence, a clear focus on what they can control and a focus on *performing* well, not just winning. To this end, focusing on performing well can be guaranteed, winning cannot.

Similarly, if leadership does indeed involve “discrete, occasional acts of influencing people to think and act different” then this is never more crucial or apparent in the approach to important situations. As part of these “discrete” acts the promotion of a challenge state should form part of whatever a leader wishes to say to individuals in the build up to an event. Even further, leaders should be able to promote a challenge state in individual athletes at an individual level. To illustrate, McGinley stated that “real management goes on in the microlevel, on the 1 to 1 level”, a philosophy that fits well with cognitive appraisals. We know that for some people it is enough to prompt them to realize that they have the resources to meet the situational demands, but with others, it is a more lengthy and in-depth process. This may involve work with a psychologist to help them develop mental skills that have been shown to increase a challenge state such as imagery (Williams & Cumming, 2012[[8]](#endnote-8)) or reappraisal (Jamieson, Mendes, & Nock, 2012[[9]](#endnote-9)). As we have found (Turner & Barker, 2014) these mental skills applied with athletes are easily translated to those working in business and other high performance domains.

But above and beyond psychologists, leaders should be making sure that individuals are approaching pressure in the right way. McGinley made sure that “that the players look[ed] focused and weren’t too nervous” helping them to display “calmness under pressure” by getting himself into “management mode”. In sum, the ability of a leader to influence individuals appraisal of the upcoming situation is vital, and is very much about how they choose to manage those individuals leading up to the event.

**LEADERSHIP FOR PRESSURE MANAGEMENT**

The challenge and threat cognitive appraisal process we describe has largely been considered to be a process dictated mostly by the individual’s estimation of the extent to which their resources meet or exceed the demands. However, a body of research indicates that the appraisals process is mediated by social interactions. To this end, social support is thought to play a significant role in how an individual approaches stressful situations, thus contributing to challenge and threat responses. The social support literature intimates that the type, frequency, and quality of social interactions may be vital in promoting challenge in the face of pressure (Rees, 2007[[10]](#endnote-10)).

The quality of social interactions has been encapsulated within the social identity tradition (see Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011[[11]](#endnote-11)), which posits that that leaders’ capacity to develop a shared psychological connection between themselves and their group is the foundation of successful leadership. Particularly in the face of stress and pressure, the stronger the connections between leaders and their group, and the connections between group members, the more likely group members are to react positively to stress (Haslam, O’Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penan, 2005[[12]](#endnote-12)). It makes sense then, that some of the high profile leaders in the stimulus article strive to foster and strengthen these connections. Developing psychological connection can be seen in the extent to which leaders, coaches, or athletes create a team identity (Slater, Coffee, Barker, & Evans, 2014[[13]](#endnote-13)). For example, by examining leadership surrounding the London 2012 Olympic Games, we demonstrated how performance directors in TeamGB created a strong team identity alongside a collective vision underpinned by distinctive team values (Slater, Barker, Coffee, & Jones, 2015[[14]](#endnote-14)). We suggest that effective leadership for pressure management should create a shared team identity, where the individual members feel a psychological connection to the group, something evident in McGinley’s approach, but perhaps not Watson’s.

McGinley’s meticulous preparation evident prior to the Ryder Cup is mirrored in elite sport by Sir David Brailsford. As indicated in the stimulus article McGinley and Brailsford appear to share many leadership principles. For instance, McGinley meticulously planned independently but empowered his players with responsibility (e.g., speaking with every player to gather their opinions of previous Ryder Cup successes and failures), which brought the Europeans together as a team and increased motivation. Speaking to John Wooden’s Pyramid of Success McGinley enabled his team to co-operate, show loyalty, and become friends. Not only was McGinley the catalyst for his players to invest in one other and the plan, he has also served his apprenticeship by competing in the previous 4 Ryder Cups. Watson had not. Put another way, McGinley understood what it took to be a European Golfer at the Ryder Cup, to create a European Team, and he had first-hand experience(s) of the triumphs and tribulations of the recent European performances. In turn, McGinley was well positioned to successfully assign certain players to leadership roles. To highlight, Poulter, Westwood, and McDowell were to “blood the rookies” and socially support them in their preparation and performance. We would suggest that these decisions are effective because the selected players represented the team ideal and epitomized the values of team Europe. In social identity terms, Poulter, Westwood, and McDowell are prototypical leaders (see van Knippenberg, 2011[[15]](#endnote-15) for a review). It is clear how McGinley could draw on recent history to create an “emotional bond” with his players, fostering strong connections required for performance under pressure.

Research has shown how creating strong emotional bonds increases levels of social support provided by teammates (Haslam et al., 2005). Social support can become a valuable resource for individuals’ cognitive appraisals in pressured situations (Cohen & McKay, 1984[[16]](#endnote-16)) and perhaps this was evident in the European team. Importantly, the receipt of social support alone may not be as beneficial as the receipt of social support from those with whom one has a strong connection. Social support is more likely to be given, received, and interpreted in the spirit intended if a strong social identity is present within a given group (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009[[17]](#endnote-17)). For example, research indicates how social support has a positive effect on stress levels if provided by an in-group member (Haslam, Jetten, O’Brien, & Jacobs, 2004[[18]](#endnote-18)).Presently, in our laboratory (Slater, Turner, Evans, & Jones, in prep[[19]](#endnote-19)) we are beginning to see that that in pressurized situations leaders with whom followers feel little or no emotional bond are more likely to display a threat state (negative stress) in response to verbal instructions.

**CONCLUSION**

Theories developed in sport, such as the TCTSA (Jones et al., 2009), are highly transferable to business environments because regardless of the context, the cognitive appraisal process is the same. Regardless of whether it’s a cup final or a pitch for millions of dollars, using management skills to promote self-efficacy, perceived control, and an approach focus is vital. It matters little whether the group is a soccer team or a sales team, developing strong relationships that cultivate social support is vital for the success of that team when the going gets tough. The development of a team identity represented by emotional bonds across a team provides the foundation of effective management in pressurized situations. But more importantly, doing leadership in a manner that resonates with identity principles will allow this to become reality. In short, effective leaders create a “challenge culture” underpinned by strong inter-group connections that promote positive approaches to pressure and stress.

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