LOUISE DEELEY

The peaks & troughs of performance:
is it possible to maintain your peak without having the trough?

Success in Sport can be like a pendulum, swinging back and forth through the highs and lows. For some, the trajectory is slower and appears more shallow, for others the swings are faster and the drop off seemingly more steep!

What affects continuity of results will depend on the timing of the swing and the energy being fed into it, so the question is, what control do we have over the pendulum and can we plan our peaks to maximize our success?

Both personally and professionally we've all set goals to get fit, reduce our golf handicap or be the best team in the world. For professional sport, the need to plan when players and teams will hit performance peaks is clear, and a lot of emphasis is placed on getting to World Number One, winning The Premiership or being an Olympic Champion – but what happens when you get there?

Staying at the top takes as much planning and preparation as getting there, albeit somewhat different, so taking time out to consider just what the possible barriers to maintaining our status are, and what strategies we need to employ to make sure the pendulum swings in our favour is essential if we're not just going to plunge back down the rankings quicker than it took to get there!

When we consider athletes and teams that have been successful *over a considerable period of time*, for example, Sir Steve Redgrave, Roger Federer and Manchester United, using hindsight to look at what strategies and personal attributes were employed to stay at the top allows us to identify what the contributing factors were, but could we use foresight in a similar way to plan what's needed for the upcoming future?

In NLP (Neuro Linguistic programming) and Sport Psychology, planning for the 'What If's', is something that should be done upfront, far enough away from 'competition so that when we are competing we can concentrate on what we need to do to get the outcome we want, rather than wasting energy focusing on the 'what if's' of things going wrong… so the same should apply to planning our stay at the top.

IDENTIFYING WHAT CAN GO WRONG BEFORE IT DOES

When things don't go as we want, it's easy to look back and say "we should have known that would happen", and maybe the problems might have been avoided if only we'd asked *"what could potentially go wrong"?*

Similar to planning an outcome or we haven't yet achieved, planning to hold onto (and potentially improve) something already in our grasp requires systematically assessing where we are now and what got us there, potential risk points that might de-rail us, and then plan accordingly to overcome those potential pitfalls.

So as well as the obvious aspects of successful performance analysis in the technical, tactical and physiological domains, I'd like to focus the remainder of this article considering risk points relating more to intra-personal factors, and how addressing these up front can potentially head off any disasters further down the line.

In earlier editions of **On the Up** I've written about the importance of emotionally intelligent coaching through NLP, and how working with both intra personal (related to ourselves) and inter personal (relating to others) factors in coaching is increasingly being recognized as one of the major requirements for successful coaching and leadership. (please go to http://www.inside-performance.com /members.html for the full articles)

As such, addressing *'what could potentially go wrong'* in the intra /inter personal domain is as important, maybe more so, than performance analysis of more 'traditional' domains.

MOTIVATION, GOALS AND VALUES – how reaching the top can change all three

It's an interesting thing, motivation – on the surface it appears a *relatively* easy thing to recognise, yet underneath, it's a complex and changing aspect of the human being. One approach previously discussed (see article i2) is the concept of *'towards'* or *'away from'* motivation which, dependant on the preference each player has, can be fundamental in why and how an individual approaches a goal, and why and how the levels of motivation may change once the goal is reached.

TOWARDS MOTIVATION

A player that is predominantly towards motivated may have their eye on achieving the goal, the prize, the world number one slot, and their motivation won't waiver until they've reached it. It gets them out of bed in the morning, it drives them to work harder and faster at training, and it pushes them to dig deep at crucial points – all because they are striving to reach that goal and claim the prize. But what happens to this motivation once their goal has been achieved? If the goal is done, then what's next? …and is there anything next?

AWAY FROM MOTIVATION

What about the player who is predominantly away from motivated? This is the player who 'doesn't want to fail', 'doesn't want to be dropped' or to be seen as a 'loser' so this motivation gets them out of bed in the morning, it drives them to work harder and faster at training, and it pushes them to dig deep at crucial points – all because they are striving to avoid failing, being dropped or being negatively labeled. By constantly moving away from situations they don't like or want, they end up getting closer to achieving their outcomes. *Their* motivation won't waiver either – until they've achieved the goal and they can relax … for now!

Add into the mix the fact that some players might run both types in differing amounts, you can start to see the value in learning how to recognize what's what so you can work with it more effectively. And this isn't solely the domain of the player either – where does *your* motivation lie and how does this affect *you*?

WHAT IS THE GOAL?

So how does this tie into goals? Clearly, the attainment of an outcome goal (the overall 'prize') will be linked to a number of factors, but when we are considering this aspect of motivation, the drivers are going to dictate how the individual will respond to their coaches, team mates and support staff – and this is linked to the ways in which their thinking and behaviours are guided and shaped via what (and how) is said to them, the performance goals set and the values the individual holds about what is important to them, or not.

This is a crucial aspect for us to understand, as without this ability to recognize different motivations (demonstrated through the language players use, their non-verbal communication and in certain cases, when a player fails to achieve their potential despite the clear technical capabilities they possess), the changes in approach often required to get the best out of the individual, for the overall benefit of team performance, isn't there.

Cause and Effect Diagram

Cause? e.g. Player 1 - near retirement

Cause? e.g. Player 2 -Towards Motivated

Potential Problem? e.g. Goal already achieved

Cause?

Cause?

Cause?

Cause?

Cause? ......

Cause?

Potential Problem?

Potential Problem?

Potential problem?

Potential Problem?

Potential Problem?

OUTCOME (eg motivation levels)
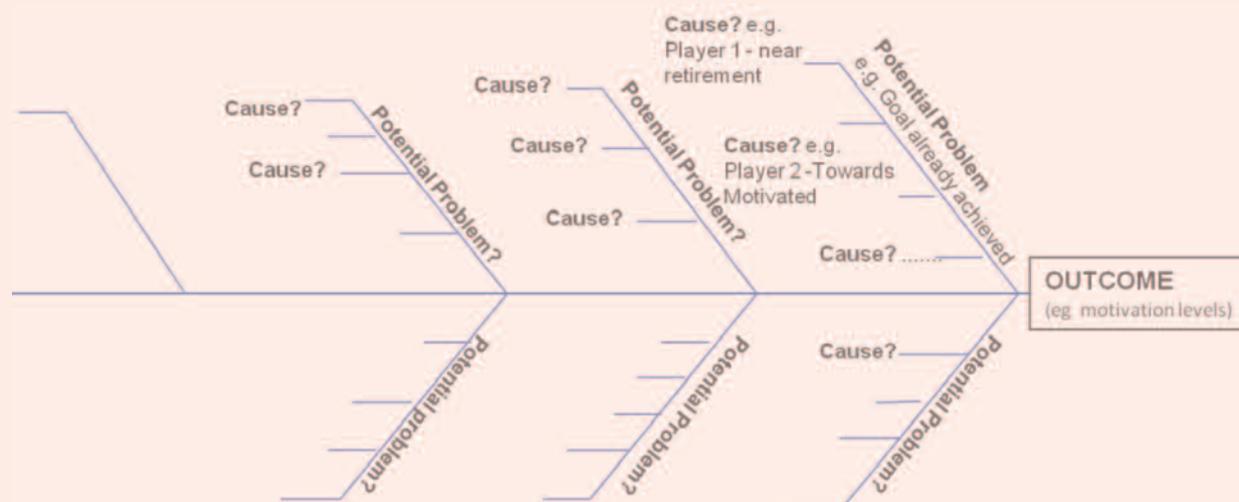
- Brainstorm all potential problems
- Draw them onto the diagram, off the central spine
- List all possible causes that may create problems

THE IMPORTANCE OF VALUES

As well as our motivation and goals, we also have to consider Values – what is important to the individual and *why* is it important? We don't all value the same things, and as a consequence, team values may not motivate the individual, or be interpreted in the same way.

I'll always remember being surprised (and somewhat annoyed!) at an NLP Elite Coach training I ran a number of years ago, when a leading GB coach expressed to the group that he *'didn't care two hoots about the England badge on his chest when he was a player, and that as long as he played, it wouldn't bother him which country he played for'*! Clearly I learnt a lot about my assumption that what was a very high value for me, wasn't for him, and that using this to motivate and inspire wouldn't work in the same way with others as it would for me! This led us into a discussion about the assumptions we make and to question whether we are really paying attention to how individuals expressed their values and what's important to them personally, as it was clear that this was a major factor in the *how's, why's and what's* that triggered and maintained motivation, and ultimately how these individual values could be worked with, incorporated and used to drive and maintain team performance as a whole.

SO, HOW DO WE GO ABOUT IT?

Just as you would look to identify potential problems in other areas of performance analysis, the same can happen with intra personal factors. A widely used tool for such a process is Failure Mode and Effects Analysis (FMEA), which grew out of systems engineering and has been modified and adapted for use with teams and individuals.

■ Gather a small group of relevant people, i.e. a mix of those involved and also individuals who are not directly involved (but are knowledgeable in such areas) and can help challenge and point out blind spots
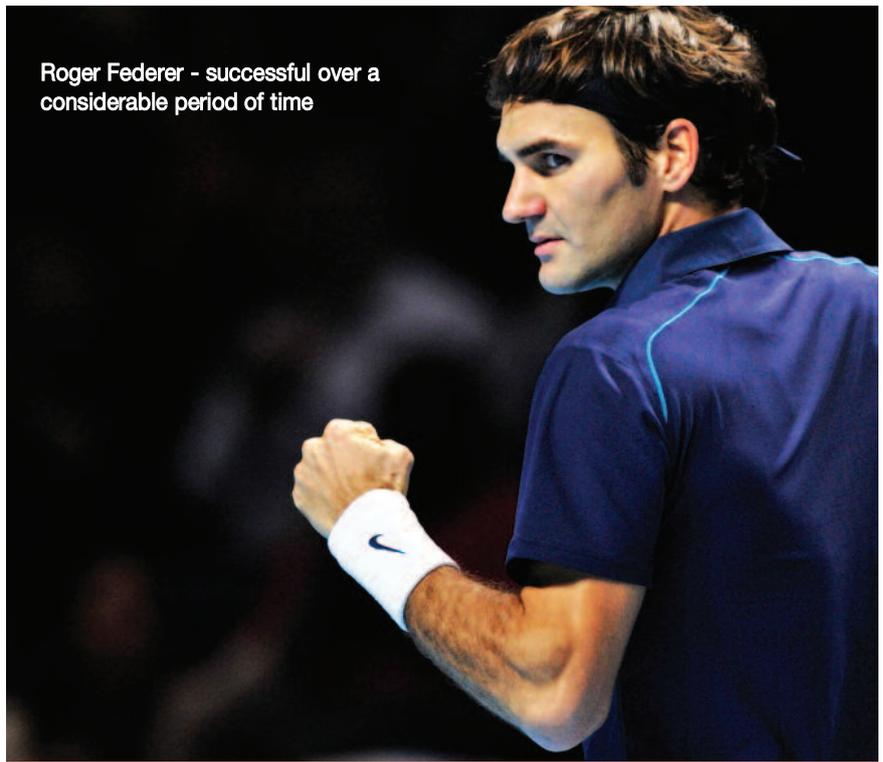
Roger Federer - successful over a considerable period of time

■ State your desired outcome, i.e. what you're looking to achieve (e.g. this will be the area you're assessing such as team cohesion, motivation levels, effective communication structures etc). You will need to be clear and precise about what specifically you are examining to avoid ambiguity, so you are all assessing the same thing.

■ Brainstorm all the potential problems that might arise, noting the cause of the problem and the effect/potential consequences that might arise. (you can use cause and effect diagrams for this).

■ Rate the effects of the problems according to:
   ■ Severity
   ■ Occurrence
   ■ Detection

■ Based on your ratings, identify the greatest threats to your continued success, select the worst offenders and consider ways in which you can tackle these problems. 'Outsiders' will help to provide different perspectives and alternative solutions, allowing for greater flexibility and a range of ways to tackle the issues. These should be well rounded, practical and easy (with the right know-how) to implement.

■ Once you've got your strategy in place, repeat the FMEA to make sure there are no other potential failure points that have been missed.

Of course, this isn't the only way to go about considering where the pendulum might swing, and the important factor is to ensure that we are paying attention to all of the factors that might knock us off the top!

Being an emotionally intelligent coach, player and professional holds the key to recognizing and working with the things that motivate, enthuse and guide us all as individuals, and as such we can honour the values that drive our behaviours. By doing this we are paying attention to the very things that will keep us at the top, and beware anyone that fails to recognize this – you only have to look around the world of sport to see the effects that making assumptions about other people's values and motivations can bring!… and finally…. based on what you've read, a question. Was the motivation behind this article predominately driven with a towards or away from motivation in mind?