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Emergency Crisis Response: Part One

Do you focus, fold or freeze?

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Do you focus, fold or freeze? Expert advice on how to perform your best even in times of emergency or crisis

by Ted C. Buffington

We have all experienced days when our self-interference was at a minimum. Whether on a sports field, at work, or in some creative effort, we've had moments when our actions and performance flowed with a kind of effortless excellence. This mental state is often referred to as "in the zone." Generally, at these times your mind is quiet and focused. When you are in the zone, you excel, you learn, and you enjoy yourself.

Unfortunately, you have also experienced the opposite — when everything you do seems difficult. With your mind filled with self-criticism, hesitation, and over-analysis, your actions become awkward, poorly timed, and ineffective. This level of immediate competency can create mental mistakes. These times can be personally frustrating or overwhelming. But for an organization, and especially in times of emergency or danger, the overall impacts can be severe, resulting in financial and even human loss.

Understanding the mental game

Most of my work is directed toward training people how to decrease mental interferences to enhance performance. I refer to my approach as the "mental game" because it sometimes seems like a competition, a game of tug-of-war between attention and focus. I always have immediate feedback if I am winning or losing the game.

The general concept is simplified and illustrated by the equation: $P = C - I$ or, performance is equal to competency minus interference. Simply put: the quality of your performance will always be equal to your competency minus your mental interference.

Capacity vs. ability

By competency, I mean all that you bring to that particular performance expression at that particular moment in time. It is all your previous training, conditioned patterns, experiences, perceptions, and mindsets, etc.

Competency also takes into consideration the relationship between capacity and ability. A person might have the capacity to learn a particular skill but lack the ability to apply the knowledge adequately to meet specific performance requirements.

For example, people are most often selected based on their capacity to perform not their ability to perform. Résumés, pre-testing and screening interviews can only help determine an individual's capacity to perform tasks. The ultimate test occurs in real time — when competency is determined through confirmation of capacity and ability.

Newbies, be it fire, police, plant maintenance, medicine, sports, etc., bring to their first day on the job a certain level of predictable competency to perform at a predetermined level. Their performance is not expected to be expert because their competency, at that moment in time, is not expert. Initially, they are only put into situations where their performance is expected to be equal to their current experiences and competencies.

In many job situations, there is a probation period to determine if ability equals capacity. This is called potential — does he or she have the potential to match the

assumed capacity with the expected level of ability to perform as required?

As new employees receive more training and experience (increased competency), the quality of their performance improves, as does the trust in their competency. But if competency alone were the secret ingredient for obtaining and sustaining optimal performance, human errors wouldn't happen.

Errors happen when we lose focus

Most human errors have little to do with competency. Accidents are generally the result of competent people losing focus. Often, the closer you get to expert, the greater the chance for the basic patterns and processes to be overlooked or ignored because you can no longer recognize or appreciate their value.

Competency based training by itself is not sufficient to guarantee consistent performance. If it were, anyone considered an expert would never fail. There would be no choke point in sports or education. Accidental deaths would be rare. No plane crashes would occur due to pilot error. Malpractice lawsuits would not exist. Occupational accidents and auto accidents would be limited to mechanical factors — not human factors.
Take a look at accident statistics and think about their overall financial impact. What are the stats for your company? Did all of these people involved in accidents lack the competency to do their job? How many of these injuries could have been avoided?

When I present crisis preparation and response trainings, initially people are uncomfortable doing anything outside their comfort zone. They want to just be in the training, get a binder and go on their way. I tend to surprise people by having them practice not only what to do but more importantly — how to do it.
In part two of this series, we'll look at ways individuals can better control their emotions even under stress and during a crisis.

Ted Buffington, founder and CEO of Achievement By Design, is an internationally recognized expert, speaker and trainer in 'performance under pressure' related processes and patterning methodologies. He has nearly 30 years of experience in sports psychology, martial arts, and working with experts in sports, public safety, military, emergency management and Fortune 500 corporations. For information visit www.toachieve.com.

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