

Military Application of Performance-Enhancement Psychology

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THE U.S. Military Academy's (USMA) Center for Enhanced Performance has developed a program to improve performance in military training. Many of the program's elements, particularly teambuilding, have implications for the 21st-century Army.

Performance enhancement is the deliberate cultivation of an effective perspective on achievement and the systematic use of effective cognitive skills. A soldier can maximize performance by mastering thinking habits and emotional and physical states. These training methods, derived from applied sport psychology used in training professional and Olympic athletes, are also applicable in other human-performance contexts.

Using the mind's power to find a competitive edge has become an indispensable element in training modern athletes. Army Transformation is similar in many respects to changes in sport, but no physical facility or group of trainers existed to train the mental science of warfighting—until now.

The USMA Performance Enhancement Center (PEC), a state-of-the-art facility for training in applied sport psychology, was established in 1989 to educate and train West Point cadets in performance-enhancement techniques to foster their full development as leaders of character. In 1992, the Academy's Reading and Study Skills Program joined PEC to form the Center for Enhanced Performance (CEP).

CEP offers cadets a unique "student success course," which combines instruction in applied sport psychology topics such as goal setting, cognitive control, and stress management with study skills such as textbook marking, test preparation, and note taking. CEP also offers performance-enhancement training in the areas of academic, athletic, and leadership performance. Each year over 300 cadets voluntarily participate in this training, seeking the mental edge for success in competitive sports; in military applications such as

marksmanship, combat diving, and parachuting; and in academic excellence.

CEP, the only center in the Army dedicated to training the mental-toughness aspect of performance, follows an educational rather than a clinical model with performance improvement as the major goal of all education and training. In cases where performance problems manifest themselves as clinical issues, referral to qualified counseling services is initiated.

Enhanced-Performance Elements

The USMA Performance Enhancement Program integrates five key elements of applied psychology into a systematic approach to empower individuals and organizations, including—

- Cognitive foundations. Understanding the psychology of high performance (what athletes describe as being in the zone) and knowing how the mind works allows performers to gain confidence and operate in the most effective manner. Skills include controlling self-talk, restructuring ineffective beliefs, and cultivating a powerful self-image.

- Goal setting. Goal setting is the process of identifying the underlying rationale for work/participation and long-term performance objectives, then creating action plans for goal attainment.

- Attention control. Attention control includes selectively attending to important cues, shifting one's field of awareness, and developing simple standard operating procedures and routines that streamline the execution of repetitive tasks to attain optimum focus and concentration.

- Stress management. Understanding how stress operates in the human system and mastering techniques of recovery and energy management is an antidote to burnout and fatigue.

- Imagery and visualization. The process of seeing, feeling, and experiencing desired outcomes and taking actions to attain them builds confidence and a readiness to move forward.

These competencies improve individual and team performance by empowering individuals to—

- Create effective thinking habits and perform with confidence.
- Improve attention to important details.
- Control physical, emotional, and mental responses to high-performance demands.
- Operate with a sense of clarity regarding immediate actions and their long-term results.

Those who train in the full performance-enhancement curriculum maximize their training and readiness for competition. Cadets also engage in training to improve physical skills, gain confidence, or learn self-regulation skills.

Teams and units also use the Performance Enhancement Program. Military competition teams have used video analysis of stream-crossing and wall-climbing strategies to ensure smooth, coordinated movement. Entire cadet corps teams have participated in teambuilding sessions to establish standards of behavior for the coming season and to set goals as a group.

The Performance Enhancement Program operates out of six staff office/training rooms equipped with audiovisual and biofeedback equipment and ergonomically designed chairs for relaxation training. A conference room, classroom, and a “Kinesthetic Room” with life-size projection video equipment for motor-control training and an audio/video production studio also support every phase of the program.

Pre- and postprogram measures of self-reported coping skills and optimism levels show significant gains as a result of participation in the program. Cadets who trained at CEP accounted for a disproportionately high number of postseason performance-award winners. Hundreds of enthusiastic testimonials from cadets indicate that many took their athletic, academic, and military performance to new levels.

Army Recruiting Command and Unit Training

The CEP has expanded performance-enhancement training beyond the USMA with tailored outreach programs to the U.S. Army Recruiting Command (USAREC), the World Class Army Program (WCAP), the Army Marksmanship Unit, Stryker Brigades at Fort Lewis, Washington, and Fort Wainwright, Alaska, and most recently, the 3d Infantry Division at Fort Stewart, Georgia.

The top 150 Army recruiters in the United States participated in a CEP study that used survey questionnaires to gather critical information about stellar recruiters’ intangible thinking and beliefs. The data revealed common mental strategies that contributed to participants’ success and allowed them to stand

apart from their peers. The top recruiters confirmed the results during a feedback presentation. This valuable information revealed that noncommissioned officers’ intangible characteristics and skills can be crystallized, shared, and implemented and that applied performance psychology has occupational uses.

Teambuilding

Because the team is important to successful recruiter performance, CEP personnel conducted teambuilding seminars with recruiting battalions to help build a culture of success and to sustain exceptional recruiter performance. One of the methods CEP used to build team cohesion was the Great Teams exercise, which included the following steps:

1. Identify the traits of great teams. This involves introspection and disclosure of each team member’s experience of being on a great team. Commonly identified traits such as focus, strong work ethic, one heart, and so forth are often identified as qualities that give a team its unique identity and account for its great success.

2. Select traits to apply to the team. Once a list of great team traits has been brainstormed, team members select three to five traits from the list that would be most beneficial to the present team.

3. Obtain consensus on key team traits. The entire team discusses how to align the team around selected traits.

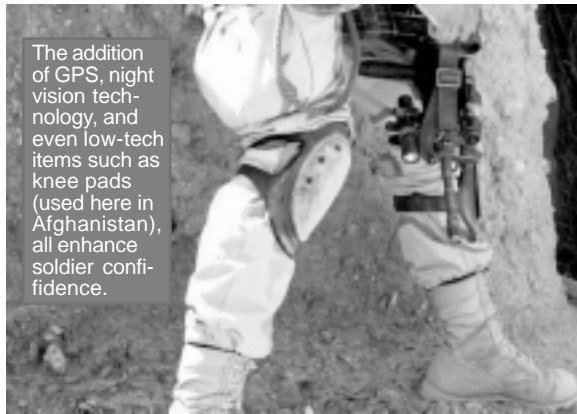
4. Identify behavioral indicators of key traits. This process translates the great team traits into specific observable, verifiable behaviors and actions. Team members specify what a neutral observer of the team will see or hear that unambiguously demonstrates each trait.

5. Demonstrate key traits through small- and large-group exercises. The team uses innovative exercises to demonstrate selected traits under unusual constraints. The exercises reveal team tendencies to fall back into familiar behavioral patterns when under stress but facilitate adopting new patterns.

6. Create a poster-size written mission statement incorporating traits and action steps.

The first five steps identify traits or characteristics and corresponding behavior the team could edit into a 3- to 4-paragraph team contract—a cross between a command philosophy and an Army creed—as a visible reminder of the team’s uniqueness and commitment to its mission.

The team contract provides a clear sense of the unit’s importance, unique capabilities, and dedication to professionalism. Because the team contract was developed from the bottom up, it facilitates total buy-in and allows everyone to see organizational standards.



Unit Marksmanship Training

CEP recently expanded its role within USAREC through performance-enhancement training with the Army's top marksmen at Fort Benning. Class presentations and individual one-on-one training sessions explored confidence, goal setting, and concentration strategies.

Goal setting facilitates reaching full potential and establishes the dream, but more important, it constructs the path or process to get to that dream. U.S. Army Field Manual 22-100, *Leadership*, states, "Goal setting is a critical part of leadership. The ultimate goal is to ensure that every soldier and unit is properly trained, motivated, and prepared to win in war. Achieving this objective will normally require that you and your subordinates jointly establish and develop goals."¹

Setting goals has helped athletes and soldiers make steady progress. Having produced their own roadmap to success, and thus having something concrete to work for, athletes or soldiers who successfully employ goal setting get the most out of their teams' and their own abilities. Studies in industrial, academic, and athletic settings reveal that goal setting improves performance in the following ways:

- Goals focus the performers' attention and action on important aspects of the task. For example, an infantryman focuses on improving such skills as correct breathing and target specification for marksmanship qualification standards.

- Goals help the performer mobilize effort. By setting a series of practice goals, a soldier will exhibit greater practice effort in attempting to achieve personal objectives.

- Goals help prolong effort and increase persistence as well as immediate effort. A soldier might lose intensity and focus during training. Increasing persistence with a number of short-range goals can help break up periods of boredom.

- Setting goals helps performers develop and use new learning strategies.² For example, a recruiter

might learn new methods of salesmanship to sign up recruits.

Because goal setting works well in other professional endeavors, its application to the military is certainly a viable option and should be more widely embraced. The USMA Performance Enhancement Program includes goal-setting procedures for individuals or teams to develop action plans and to help identify behaviors and competencies that need improvement.

Training to Enhance Confidence

Training to maximize individual confidence is critical to performance enhancement. Confidence is a crucial yet poorly understood intangible that influences every aspect of human performance. Training to enhance confidence begins with the realization that individual perception of oneself and one's situation, not previous success or positive reinforcement, produces confidence.

Two complementary types of self-discipline, referred to as mindsets, are the major components in confidence training. The first is the discipline to physically "train." The second is the discipline to unconditionally trust what has been trained. Confidence is gained through the correct application and blending of these two mindsets.

The self-discipline to work physically on the technical and tactical fundamentals of warfighting is necessary to advance from the beginner level. These fundamentals can seem repetitive and mundane, but the self-discipline to work diligently and persistently is essential. A commitment to spending countless hours learning fundamentals and persevering through accompanying discomfort will develop technical and tactical efficiency to rely on in war. This self-discipline is the training mindset.

The trusting mindset takes one the rest of the way to or beyond the standard. In performance enhancement, CEP trains individuals to trust their abilities. Soldiers, who want to become as good as they can be, must free their minds when intense need arises, as in battle. Precisely when the rest of the world thinks they should focus their minds on techniques and the results of their actions, great athletes and soldiers trust completely in their abilities and preparation. When they let themselves become totally caught up in what is happening now, their true level of talent and training emerges.

In an April 2001 memorandum, Chief of Staff of the Army General Eric K. Shinseki wrote, "Everything we are called upon to do in the Army requires teamwork, and teamwork is built on a foundation of trust and confidence within units—between soldier and soldier, between leader and led, and between units who see themselves serving side by side. That

trust and confidence emerges from our daily commitment to our Army values: loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. Without trust, there can be no dignity and respect for the individual soldier, and cohesion and morale in our units would suffer.”³ Shinseki’s statement mandates the Army to explore performance psychology as a training resource.

The CEP has created a mobile training team of officers trained in performance enhancement. The team provides introductory and advanced performance psychology training to Army units. To date, the 172d Stryker Brigade Combat Team and the 1st Brigade, 25th Infantry Division have participated in full-day training sessions to familiarize all leaders—from squad leader to brigade staff—with the key concepts, terminology, and training methods of performance enhancement. The 3d Infantry Division is participating in this training throughout the fall of 2004. The CEP training teams provide each unit with guided visualization audio CDs that enable soldiers to mentally rehearse common tasks such as cordon and search, react to contact, and react to ambush.

Implications

The uses for performance-enhancement training in the versatile and ever-changing Army are many. With new types of weapons systems, equipment, and organizations appearing at an almost unfathomable pace, the U.S. soldier remains at the forefront of change and must meet or exceed high performance standards despite obstacles and distractions. The Army can benefit from training that—

- Quantifies and makes tangible, to all Army leaders, that confidence and composure in any situation is a skill.

- Creates a belief in soldiers, squads, platoons, and higher level commands and instills the power to

achieve any task requested of them.

- Gives soldiers the mindset to trust their abilities and allow for instinctual release of their skills, bringing out their best consistently without thinking.

- Encourages soldiers to listen; focus; manage their time and energy; and see the battlefield as their arena and the outcomes as successful.

Shinseki said, “[The Army Vision] is not just about people or equipment. It is about an investment in future American leadership and security. . . . We will repay America’s investment in its Army with quality people, warfighting readiness, and . . . a land force transformed to meet threats all across the spectrum of operations. . . . Achieving this vision will enable our Army to better meet the diverse and complex demands of tomorrow’s security environment [and will give] the Nation an array of deployable, agile, versatile, lethal, survivable, and sustainable formations, which are affordable and capable of reversing the conditions of human suffering rapidly and resolving conflicts decisively. The Army’s deployment is the surest sign of America’s commitment to accomplish[ing] any mission that occurs on land. [We] know we must change; we have an idea of what we want to be—we don’t know all the answers, but we’re asking the right questions and we’ll go where the answers are.”⁴ One of those answers is performance-enhancement training at all levels in the U.S. Army. *MR*

NOTES

1. U.S. Department of the Army Field Manual 22-100, *Leadership* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1990), 46.
2. Edwin A. Locke and Gary P. Latham, *A Theory of Goal-Setting and Task Performance* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990).
3. GEN Eric K. Shinseki, “Dignity and Respect,” on-line at <www.army.mil/ig>, accessed 14 July 2004.
4. Shinseki, “The Army Vision: Soldiers on Point for the Nation . . . Persuasive in Peace, Invincible in War,” speech at the annual meeting of the Association of the United States Army, Washington, D.C., 12 October 1999, on-line at <www.usarpac.army.mil/OLD_WEBPAGE_JUNE2003/docs/transformation/Gen%20Shinseki%20transformation%20speech.htm>, accessed 4 August 2004.

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