

Attaining the Peak

Three factors that inhibit performance.

By Marcus Marsden

Entitlement

Fear of Failure

Resilience

The willingness of individuals and teams to experience the 'discomfort of adaptation', as opposed to the 'comfort of learning', is the crucial meta-factor in the drive to increase performance. Too much time and effort is spent on strategy and knowledge. This is not to say that strategy and knowledge are not important. However, the focus on looking 'outside' rather than 'inside' for performance solutions, while it may be more comfortable for everyone concerned, does not quite cut it. As Grashow and Heifetz state in *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership*, "The most common error organisations make is to try and solve adaptive challenges with technical means."¹

An adaptive factor is one that requires the individual (or team) to examine themselves and then adapt their mental models or beliefs, rather than simply feed new strategies and actions into the thrasher of their existing mindset. Applying new technical factors is like pouring new water into the same vessel, whereas using an adaptive approach involves shifting the form and the shape of the vessel itself, so that the water can move in new directions.

Let's explore three crucial adaptive factors.

Entitlement

By entitlement, I mean "that to which I have a right". The assessment of your entitlement in an area usually involves either something that you are entitled to do or not do, or how you are entitled to be or not be, in a particular situation. Entitlement is a very common assessment that undercuts an individual's capacity for effective action.

There are many reasons why someone might start to assess themselves as entitled to a certain behaviour or status. The most common reasons come from a position held or a length of time served. For example: "I am a Director now, so...", "I have worked in this company for 10 years, so...", "I am the father/mother/eldest child/breadwinner of this family, so...", "I have been working hard all week, so..."

This sense of entitlement comes from an assessment that you have done something that has earned you the right to do, or not do, something else. The feeling is also comparative: "I have done something and you/they have not". For if the other person has done as much as me, then they too would be entitled to the same benefits. This is often linked to a sense of 'earning your stripes' or 'having paid your dues'.

Asian businesses, in general, tend to follow a command-and-control or top-down management culture (which is certainly not to say that it does not show up in Western businesses). As a result, longer-serving members who have endured this culture for many years and then get promoted to a position of power feel that it is now their turn to call the shots. They have been at someone else's beck and call for 20-odd years and now it is their turn to give the orders. Usually, when someone believes themselves to be entitled to something, they have a logical reason to justify that belief. After all, if you are a senior manager and have worked in the company for 20 years, should you not have rights and privileges that a new management trainee cannot share?

It may well be the case that your past history has earned you certain rights in the company (or family), but when you are faced with a choice between exercising those rights and being effective, which will you choose? A surprising number of people will choose the former option. They see that if they engage in a task that is 'below their pay grade', there is the possibility of success, maybe even a major one; but what gets in the way is their notion of entitlement and their idea of fairness. For instance, you might hear this: "Sure, I know I could stay back at the office to finish this report, but that is no longer my job. I used to do that when I was a junior manager, and now, I'm a senior manager. It is not fair to expect me to still do that, and I'm entitled not to do it—just look at my title."

The consequence is that results suffer, sacrificed on the altar of righteousness. It has become more important to be right about one's rights than to achieve the best possible result. The rights to which you believe you

are entitled may be enshrined in a contract, or they may simply be unspoken expectations that reside in your head. Both are barriers to being effective, but the latter is especially difficult for others to work with, as people rarely have any idea as to what your unspoken expectations actually are. What makes entitlement particularly combustible is the mood of righteous indignation that often accompanies it. Such a combination can make a person very difficult to work with, as they are either likely to explode without warning, from the perceived injustice of it all, or simply clam up and take the attitude of, "Well if you can't figure out the problem here, then I'm not going to tell you."

So, what is the alternative? The first step is to recognise the appearance of entitlement in yourself when it arises (and it surely will, at some point in your life). Once you become aware of it, then you have the possibility of adapting and making a different choice. You cannot change something that you are not aware of. Coaches and clients both have things to which we are blind; it is part of the human condition. This is why powerful leadership development initiatives generally begin by asking you to look at yourself—learning to see things in yourself is a necessary but often overlooked first step that needs to be taken before you can learn to work with others. This is the adaptation of which we spoke earlier.

The second step is to ask yourself what you want to achieve in the situation that you are facing: Do you want to be right about your assessment of entitlement or do you want to be effective? Are you willing to take a responsible attitude with regard to the results around you, or are you instead going to focus on your rights in the

situation? If you are currently experiencing any frustration in life with regard to your results or your relationships, check in with yourself and see if there is a notion of entitlement lurking somewhere in there. It is one of the biggest barriers to being effective.

Conversely, it is equally possible to develop a pattern of feeling unentitled, an assessment that often sounds like this: "I do not deserve happiness, success, love, etc." While it might look like the complete opposite of a sense of entitlement, a belief of unentitlement can be equally disempowering, equally constraining, and just as sticky. The assessment of being unentitled is also a common barrier in Asian businesses and is again attributable to the long-established top-down culture in the business and/or the family unit. It creates the feeling of, "I am not entitled to speak up with a different opinion to my boss or my parents."

Interestingly, in our leadership development and top team workshops, very often the team leader actually wants to hear dissenting voices and would welcome some healthy debate. However, even when they articulate their desire for this, their team members are very reluctant to speak up. This suggests that

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the issue is really less about culture (because if they were victims of culture, then they would do what the leader wants and speak up) and more to do with the discomfort that the team members themselves would feel if they did speak up. This love of comfort is, in itself, a major barrier to peak performance in today's world and if one believes oneself to be entitled to comfort, then a new level of performance is highly unlikely.

Fear of failure

The second barrier to peak performance hides in plain sight. Do you believe you

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are, however, other results that are outside the box; ones that you would need to take a risk to achieve. The results that involve risk-taking never miraculously show up inside your comfort zone on their own accord—you need to make them happen, and you make them happen by expanding the boundaries of your comfort zone.

Let's say the goal that you want to achieve is to spend more time with your family during the week. However, in order to achieve that, you need to take the risk of delegating your work. No one is going to give you that result; you need to make it happen. But you don't do it because you think it will not work, because you do not want to 'fail'. However, a closer look reveals that the logic does not add up. By not taking a risk, you are guaranteeing failure! When you don't take a risk, you stay in your comfort zone and that is the one place where the new result will never show up. So, if you really have a fear of failure, then you would be taking risks all the time!

Something else is going on. You are not really afraid of failure. Instead, you are afraid of being judged as a failure by others (and/or yourself). In classic Asian cultural terms, you are afraid of losing face. You are more interested in protecting your image than you are

have a fear of failure? If so, you are in very good company. When we ask this question in our leadership development workshops, invariably almost every hand in the room goes up. Surprisingly though, 99 percent of the time, this belief is not what is getting in the way of performance. This fear of failure is a total mirage—smoke and mirrors designed to obscure the real issue from view. In Asia, this often has a cultural angle of 'losing face'. This concept of 'face' is a very commonly cited issue in Asia and is closer to the truth of what is going on.

Imagine your comfort zone as a box with you inside it. The box contains all the results that you already have and those that you could achieve (if you chose to) without taking a risk. There

in creating the results that you say you want. Your image wants you to believe this: If you fail, then you are a failure. However, that is not at all the case. If it were true, then Steve Jobs would be a failure because he got fired from Apple, Roger Federer would be a failure because he has lost in 10 Grand Slam Finals, and Thomas Edison would be a massive failure because it took him 1,000 failures before he invented the light bulb!

The truth is that successful people fail way more often than unsuccessful people. Failure in itself is not the issue; rather it is what happens after a failure that makes the difference. Do you run back to the safety of your comfort zone and produce self-defence justifications or do you brush yourself down and go again? It is a misconception to think that one can avoid people's judgements and save face by staying safe and hiding in your comfort zone. Human beings are judgemental machines and you will be judged just as much for playing safe as you will be for taking a risk. The only difference is that taking a risk carries with it the possibility of creating a new result in your life, whereas playing safe will keep you stuck in your current results.

I very often encounter this fear of failure when I am coaching middle and senior managers. They have done well in their careers and then they stop and look around. They realise the stakes are higher so they start playing safe, waiting and holding back. They achieved their early success by 'playing to win' and then they begin to play 'not to lose'. This is a very big shift in attitude that generates different results and also different experiences in life.

If you have ever taken part in a ropes course or climbed a high ladder, you will have experienced the same phenomenon. While you are climbing up and focusing on the end goal, you are exhilarated, but when you stop climbing and look down to see how far up you have come, fear kicks in and you cling on for dear life. The longer you stay stuck, the greater the fear gets. The only way around this is to keep moving.

Many people whom I coach will only 'play to win' and participate 100 percent when they know (or are very sure) that they will win. When they hold something back, the internal logic is, "If I lose this game, I can always say to myself (and to others) that I didn't go 100 percent." An alternative justification is, "When I feel confident, then I'll take that risk." What they fail to realise is that life actually happens the other way around: "After I take the risk, then I feel confident." These kinds of logic are a great way to protect your image and save face, but they are also a great way to ensure that you never experience peak performance and win the big ones, the ones that you really want to win!

Resilience

The idea of resilience as an important factor in performance and leadership is not a new one; indeed it has developed a great degree of traction in the last decade. Resilience is most easily and simply defined as 'the ability to bounce back'.

The modern world is obsessed with comfort—virtually every innovation in the last 20 years is aimed at making us more comfortable, from Deliveroo and Uber to smart fridges, there is an app for almost everything out there that you want to do. At one level, this is great news. We no longer need to experience the pain of discomfort in order to achieve the result that we desire. However, this reduction in discomfort has another consequence; it makes us soft in the face of difficulties, so when setbacks occur (as they inevitably will), we are not equipped to deal with them. Our ability to 'bounce back' is compromised by our love for comfort.

Resilience is developed in the face of discomfort, not comfort. The recent tidal wave of comfort-generating innovations has created a 'resilience deficit' and so it is no great surprise that resilience is now such a hot issue in leadership development and performance management. Ironically, the preferred 21st century answer to building resilience is to develop it in the most comfortable way possible, i.e., sitting in a classroom. Unsurprisingly, the results are usually less than stellar.

The Five Pillars of Performance

Most approaches to resilience focus on giving you knowledge about how you should think and feel, and what you should do in order to become resilient. They may even look at inspiring stories regarding how other people have shown great resilience.

We use a wider approach—that of the Five Pillars of Performance (refer to Figure 1). This takes into account the fact that, in order to develop new capacities and create peak performance, you need to embrace not only your mental (what you think/know) and emotional states (what you feel) but also your physical state. Then, in order to sustain that new level of performance, you need to pay attention to the two external pillars of support and practice.

THE PHYSICAL STATE PILLAR

Let's look at what happens when all three of the internal Pillars of Performance are aligned, beginning with the Physical State Pillar. This approach is founded upon what happens in cardiac health tests: the doctor puts you on a treadmill and gradually increases the speed/incline, noting the time it takes

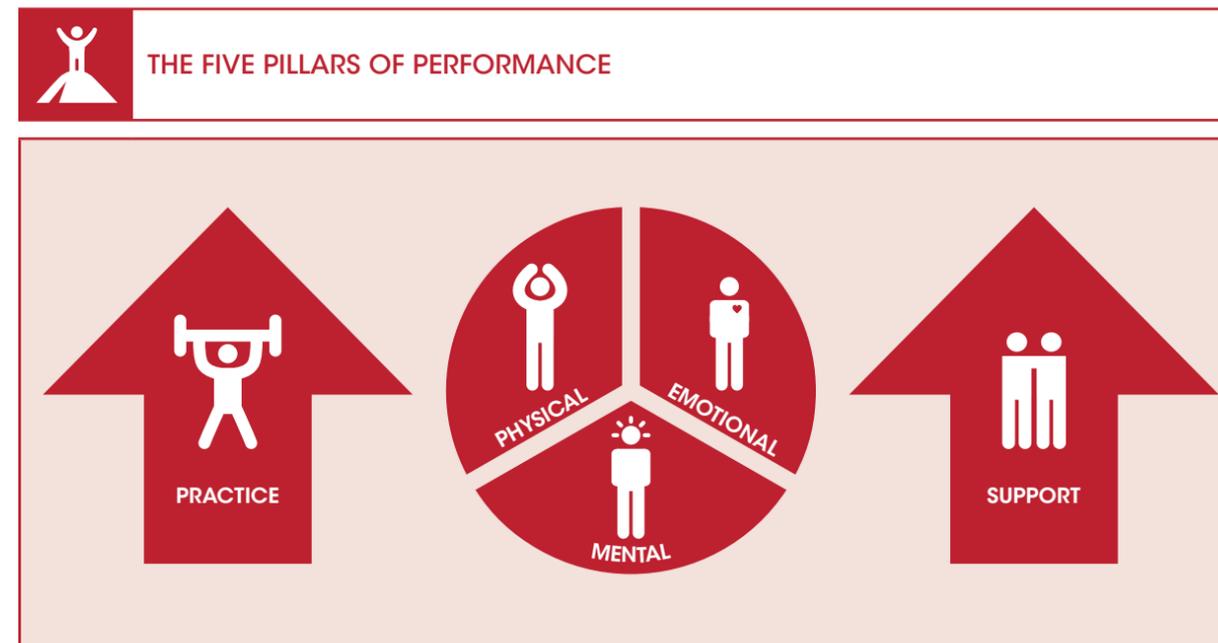


FIGURE 1

Source: Marsden & Marsden, "Fit to lead: Transforming your leadership with the 5 Pillars of performance" (2017)

for your heart rate to reach a certain level. He then reduces the speed/incline and notes how long it takes your heart to return to its resting rate. A healthy heart takes a long time to reach its stress point and a short time to return to its resting rate. In other words, a healthy heart takes a long time to get stressed, but then, when it does reach a certain level of stress, it is quick to 'bounce back' to its normal rate.

High Intensity Interval Training (HIIT) repeatedly mirrors the cardiac test pattern to test the Physical State with short periods of high intensity activity, followed by a rest period. The learner is no longer sitting in an air-conditioned training room, talking about resilience. Instead they are physically building the neural connections that are critical in the body's stress and recovery system. Such an exercise creates and sustains the first key belief that underpins resilience: I know I can bounce back.

There are two factors at work in HIIT—the initial stressing period and the subsequent resting period. It is the combination that is important if you want to boost your capacity for resilience. We have noticed that most leaders favour one over the other. Some are addicted to going flat out and see resting as an evidence of weakness. Some are addicted to comfort and see 'going for it' as dangerous. If you consistently favour one over the other, you undermine your capacity for resilience. Trying to sprint forever wears you down and leaves you exhausted, with no energy to bounce back. Trying to stay

comfortable forever reduces your confidence and leaves you lacking the experience of bouncing back.

THE EMOTIONAL STATE PILLAR

However, we are not advocating for a purely physical approach. The Emotional and Mental State Pillars also have their roles to play. When what you are working on is important to you, not just intellectually ("it's a good idea") but emotionally ("I am genuinely passionate about this idea"), then it is far easier to 'bounce back'. People often lack resilience because they are working on things that they are not emotionally connected to or, more often, things that they are afraid to emotionally connect to. The Emotional State Pillar can help to create and sustain the second key belief that generates resilience: It is vital for me to bounce back.

When you allow yourself to be vulnerable to your commitment, then you start to believe that, "It is critically important for me to bounce back". This is a critical belief to have if you are going to be resilient.

THE MENTAL STATE PILLAR

The Mental State Pillar is also important, but maybe not in the way you think. Knowing theories about resilience and how to build it is great, but on their own, that knowledge will not make you resilient. Instead, you need to prove to yourself that you are able to bounce back. You can create and sustain

this belief about your ability to bounce back by fuelling yourself with energy, and energy comes from effective nutrition. You need energy if you are to consistently exhibit resilience. The third key belief that underpins resilience is: I am able to bounce back.

PRACTICE AND SUPPORT

While the internal Pillars are critical in supporting you to create new results, you will not sustain those results without paying attention to the two external Pillars of Practice and Support. Unfortunately, neither of these Pillars are particularly fashionable today. The desire for immediate results is a very strong pull. “Practice is boring. I want the result and I want it now”, is a very common, often internal refrain. The other barrier to practice is that, especially initially, it involves failure and discomfort, two factors that we have already seen to be very unpopular.

The Pillar of Support is very often one of the biggest barriers to taking your results to a new level. There are two common images that get in the way. One is the ‘superhero image’, where someone is driven to prove their worth by taking on everything themselves. The other is the ‘nice guy/gal image’ where someone is unwilling to ask for support because they fear being a burden on someone else.

The most successful sportsmen/sportswomen in the world have coaches, because they are more passionate about winning than they are about looking good and protecting their image. These two external Pillars work most powerfully in tandem: Practicing with a well-chosen member of your support network. For instance, if you want to sustain your capacity to be resilient, then simply reading this article will not cut it and neither will using the ideas one or two times. Similarly, if you try and do it all by yourself, you are far less likely to succeed than if you enlist a support network. Constant practice with a support group is a critical factor to make this work.

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No pain, no gain

Taken together, entitlement, fear of failure and lack of resilience form a very powerful trio of barriers to people achieving peak performance. To overcome them, we ask you to consider three powerful questions:

1. Am I willing to experience discomfort—physically, mentally and/or emotionally?
2. Am I willing to develop effective practices?
3. Am I willing to engage effective support?

If you can honestly answer all three questions with a “Yes!” then you are on your way to taking your performance to a new level.

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The material in this article is derived from the book, “Fit to Lead: Transforming Your Leadership With The 5 Pillars Of Performance,” authored by Marcus Marsden and Sari Marsden, published in 2017.

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