

You've Entered the Training Zone

By Cresencio Torres and Mary Bruxelles

*Sometimes,
everything
comes together.
You can see it
in the faces of
your trainees;
you can feel it
in the air. Such
periods don't
have to end.
With practice,
you can make
peak perfor-
mance an
everyday
reality.*

How do you describe the magic in those special moments of peak experience when everything just comes together? In *Re-Inventing the Corporation*, Celtic great Bill Russell eloquently portrays those times when his game rose to new levels. "All sorts of odd things happened. Maximum physical effort wasn't painful, quick maneuvers weren't surprising. Premonitions were consistently correct, and there was a wonderful interconnectedness of the players. . . . There have been many times in my career when I felt moved or joyful, but these were the moments when I had chills pulsing up and down my spine."

Robin Williams, the comedian, describes his multiple-personality stage performances in the December 1987 *Time*. "When it works, it's like. . . freedom! Suddenly these things are just coming out of you. You're in control, but you're not. The characters are coming through you. Even *I'm* going, 'Whoa!' It's that Zen lock. It's channeling with Call Waiting."

Like Russell and Williams, today's managers and executives are trying to harness peak performance and transfer it to the business setting. In the marathon for excellence, professional men and women are analyzing and trying to mimic the traits and techniques of great athletes, leaders, and visionaries. What are trainers doing about high performance? What is our position? How can we stand up and be counted?

We all have had those moments when we've been on a roll and accom-

plished incredible things with groups. We've talked about those "hot" moments with pride and gusto, usually with our colleagues who have shared similar experiences. We now need to articulate just what the concept of peak performance means to trainers, so that we can not only replicate it but also sustain it. The challenge is to stretch peak experience into standard, optimal training performance—we must make the peak consistent, not let it be the kind of magical, fleeting moment that Russell and Williams describe. With the critical role trainers play in shaping today's business world, we have much to learn and to gain in defining peak-performance characteristics.

Today's trainers are key strategic facilitators of individual, group, and organizational change. That is due, in part, to business' need for effective leadership, self-empowerment, and creativity to maintain the competitive edge. We know that trainers contribute to creating model environments that foster self-direction, participation, and responsibility, and that result in increased quality and productivity. We know that they can provide guidance and support for people struggling with burnout and shattered job expectations. And we know that they can show others how to value differences when they create effective working relationships among diverse populations.

Past organizational history, however, points to the fact that the training resource is undervalued and that training is vulnerable to fluctuations in the business cycle. But trainers must be recognized as valued business assets. To that end, trainers must empower themselves by developing their knowledge bases, skill levels, and self-awareness in new, dynamic ways.

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To achieve that peak performance, we must enter the Training Zone.

What is the Training Zone?

Trainers enter the Training Zone when their best abilities merge at new levels of awareness to create optimal training performance. In the Zone, a balance of intense cognitive and intuitive experience is fueled by the desire to be the best.

When operating in the Zone, trainers experience a strong sense of purpose, clarity of vision, and vitality of expression that enable them and empower others to perform at their best. They operate at their maximum levels of sensory awareness, testing and stretching the limits of their knowledge, abilities, values, and beliefs. They are able to see something before it becomes obvious to others. They are able to feel empathy with others without losing their ability to act. And, they are able to listen, communicate, and provide feedback that is clear and concise.

In the Zone, trainers are driven by a strong, internal center of control that permits them to act in sync with all their physical, emotional, and intellectual abilities. As they stimulate excitement and creativity in others, they experience the power and genius in themselves. Thus, the Training Zone is a time of personal harmony and productivity when a trainer can tap reserves of energy and intuitive power to meet the challenges of demanding training situations.

Encounters in the Zone

In our discussions with trainers, HRD specialists, and OD personnel, we saw that they share similar patterns or qualities as they strive for optimal training performance. They feel heightened awareness, high energy, strong interconnectedness, visual clarity, synergy, and self-alignment.

One 15-year veteran describes it in the following way:

"When I'm at my peak performance, I get very focused on what I'm doing, and to some degree, I'm not really thinking. I'm not censoring myself, either. I can feel my energy flowing, and I feel empowered. I trust myself, the process I'm involved in, and the people I'm working with. I don't fear because I'm more fully present and willing to engage in interaction. Conflict creates a sense of positive energy, allowing me to develop options and more win-win situations."

Another experienced trainer described her feelings this way:

"I'm conscious of being alert, and I feel efficient; I'm not second-guessing myself. I feel tuned in to what people are saying, and I'm fully aware of what's going on around me. I'm able to use normal distractions as learning points. It's a feeling of having a tight focus on my objectives and outcomes. I'm more aware of the significance and power we have as trainers in helping people learn, and I know that I can generate an excitement that compels people to expand their boundaries. That is quite a responsibility. When I'm there, everything is working for me. I feel powerful and have the ability to empower others. The outcome is that

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I feel great, and the people I'm working with do, too."

The training director of a *Fortune* 500 company describes the sensation of anticipation and control:

"When I reach my top level, I experience time distortion. I'm aware that everything around me is moving much more slowly than normal. I think that's what allows me to anticipate what's going to happen next. It's much easier to read people's faces and nonverbal signals. I'm interacting and thinking at the same time and have a feeling of being both in and out of the experience. I can anticipate questions and have the responses before the questions even come. I can use stressful situations to create more energy. I feel as if I'm more alive, and participants pick up on my energy, which keeps everybody moving in a positive direction. We seem to feed off each other in a supportive way. We learn from each other, and that's the best thing that happens."

Those trainers and others whom we interviewed indicated that after they left the Training Zone, they rarely discussed their experiences. Most of them found that they couldn't label the experience easily and that when they tried to translate it into everyday language, it sounded like a transcen-

dental experience. Such talk can produce adverse reactions in people who haven't gone through the same thing. It's fine for athletes and comedians to describe peak experiences, but for business-minded people—especially trainers, who are often accused of being "touchy-feely"—it's certainly suspect. We believe, however, that knowing and articulating an experience is the first step to replicating it. If it's possible for some trainers to operate in the Training Zone, then we know it's possible for others, too.

Penetrating the Zone

We found that trainers could identify when they were in the Zone simply by recalling a time when they experienced optimal performance in past training situations. Still, they were unable to understand the patterns and behaviors they exhibited when there. In our discussions with trainers, our challenge was to analyze the components of the Training Zone so that we could understand the experience.

For the most part, we found that trainers enter the Zone when they experience a merging of their knowledge base, their learned skills (the ways to implement the knowledge), and most important, their self-awareness (the mental, physical, and emotional understanding of self). In addition, they look at outcomes of situations rather than dwelling in the world of problems.

Knowledge base: A trainer needs to spend a great deal of time developing his or her knowledge base, because it serves as the foundation for learning experiences. The knowledge base, as we define it, is made up of psychological concepts, models related to individual, group, and systems development, and theories about change.

Learned skills: To support the knowledge base, trainers must be able to translate cognitive information and theory into practical, everyday use. The skills required for effective translation are the abilities to

- communicate;
- diagnose diverse information;
- accurately observe multiple levels of interaction;
- provide feedback on observations and insights;
- integrate and transfer learning;
- demonstrate new behaviors;
- provide a safe atmosphere for learning.

Those abilities make up a trainer's

bag of tricks. When trainers make their jobs look easy, they are using their knowledge base and learned skills to present information that is direct, smooth, and captivating. They enhance learning by responding to people clearly and creating a positive learning environment.

Self-awareness: The concept of self-awareness, while sounding quite metaphysical, has a precise meaning for veteran trainers. Their Training-Zone experiences contain a heightened proficiency in the following areas.

■ **Sensory acumen.** Their physical senses are sharper than usual, enabling them to see, hear, and feel the subtle intricacies of the communication process. That fine-tuning increases trust and rapport and serves as the basic foundation for influencing others.

■ **Adaptability.** Optimal performance is characterized by a trainer's ability to change behavior easily and readily when desired outcomes aren't being satisfied. That quality, combined with a general focus on outcomes (described below), enables a trainer to deal creatively with resistance or difficult issues.

■ **Balance.** This might be called self-alignment. Veteran trainers have achieved a high level of understanding and acceptance of their own personality traits and behaviors. Therefore, trainees perceive their interactions and style of training to be harmonious.

Outcome orientation: During our interviews, trainers indicated that they somehow maintain different perspectives or mindsets when they perform at their peaks. They find themselves oriented toward outcomes—they maintain the willingness to see opportunity and, in so doing, feel self-assured. An outcome orientation can be developed intentionally rather than as a byproduct of a peak experience. We believe that trainers have many possibilities for creating and enhancing optimal performance by developing the capacity to

■ specify outcomes for training situations rather than define existing problems;

■ respond to problems by asking how things can be different rather than why they won't change;

■ view unproductive experiences as valuable feedback rather than failure;

■ see situations in terms of opportunity rather than limitation.

Those capacities help trainers develop a confident, optimistic world

view that often stands in opposition to the linear problem-solving processes that many of us are used to.

Required levels of expertise

Knowledge and learned skills will always be necessary for competent training performance, but the last two categories, self-awareness and outcome orientation, represent new arenas for trainer development. The challenge for trainers is to explore and refine methods for becoming outcome-oriented and for learning new ways to enhance self-awareness.

Because the combination of competencies represents uncharted territory, we recognize that trainers must achieve a certain level of expertise before they can learn to sustain optimal performance. They need to have simultaneous growth in knowledge, skills, orientation to outcomes, and

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self-awareness before they can perform intentionally at their optimal levels. Without a prerequisite level of expertise, a trainer's entrance into the Training Zone is probably a combination of a mysterious voyage and a happy accident.

To depict how a trainer's competencies must converge to enter the Zone, we have categorized the stages of development through which trainers must go.

■ **Toddler trainer:** This is the entry phase of the profession. At this point, trainers' energies focus on learning the basics. Knowledge and skills acquisition are the goals, and everything feels new and a little awkward. Toddler trainers have good and bad training days. The potential to reach the Training Zone is minimal.

■ **Cocky trainer:** When trainers have been in the profession for a short time, they develop cognitive foundations and can demonstrate a basic grasp of the subject matter. They've watched experienced trainers work in smooth, easy manners. They even copy behaviors in an attempt to do well. They've learned a few techniques that make people feel good, and pretty

soon their bags of tricks expand. Because of some early successes, they begin to feel that training is a "piece of cake" and that they're certainly ready to take on any and all challenges. They can sense that the Training Zone exists, but are not experienced enough to articulate it or discuss it with colleagues.

■ **Arrogant trainer:** This category is made up of experienced trainers who know their subject matter well and have developed skills to implement that knowledge. By this point, they've involved themselves in ongoing professional development to increase self-awareness. They like themselves and their competencies—they're good, and they know it. They've probably experienced the Training Zone and attempt to describe it to others. They can't sustain their optimal performance, however; they can reach the pinnacle, but then somehow find themselves on lower plateaus. Arrogant trainers aim to be the best, but if they fail to persevere in the pursuit of their goal, they sometimes find themselves trading the positive aspects of pride for the negative ones.

■ **Self-assured trainer:** These are the veteran role-models who continue to develop within themselves all the necessary components for optimal performance. They're the recognized experts who love to learn from others and who thrive on feedback that fuels their insight as well as their egos. The self-assured trainer knows what the Training-Zone experience is about. Such trainers differ from others in that they are able to summon and merge their capabilities, self-confidence, and optimism and enter the Zone by choice, traveling there for as long as necessary.

The realm of possibility

By looking at a trainer's stages of development, we see that knowledge, skills, and most important, self-awareness with an outcome orientation contribute to his or her ability to understand and sustain optimal training performance. But without full development in any one of those areas, the Training-Zone experience will remain beyond the reach of many Toddler and Cocky trainers.

The potential exists for all trainers to make consistent excellence a reality. It's up to trainers to discover that to be the best lies within the realm of possibility.