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## LEARNING

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### TUNNEL VISION

It's the cup final time of year again. Having done all your pre-match preparation, some of you will be lining up with your teams in the tunnel. At least two of our readers will be doing it in Cardiff on the 22nd. You are ready to go. Outside the crowd awaits. Will you get that tunnel moment? The tunnel moment is when the helpful butterflies are replaced by a feeling of being out of control.

What can a coach do to ramp up performance without tipping players through anxiety and into stress? The stress response is immediate and physiological. Tip a player into stress and watch the primitive survival instincts take over. Where before there was creativity what you now see is inhibition; independent decision-making is replaced by over reliance on others; flexibility and willingness to adapt to change goes out the window! A key skill for the coach is to challenge and stretch without inducing performance related anxiety. Here are ten things a great teacher or a great coach can do to reduce stress in performers.

#### Routine

High levels of unfamiliarity precipitate the stress response. In research published in 2003, testosterone levels were considerably higher before home games in premiership level players than before away games, particularly when playing extreme levels. This is in part explained by perceptions about territory. Testosterone is a hormone related to aggression. Primates become defensive about their space. High levels of familiarity – pre-match rituals, your own space, predictable order to what happens – make it easier to feel in control

#### Control

Feeling in control reduces anxiety. Sudden changes, novelty, or unfamiliar routines all affect the sense of being in control. It's a perception thing. When you feel it slipping from you, then anxiety goes up. In a coaching environment or a classroom, an easily understood structure gives a feeling of control. Sessions with a strong beginning, middle and end. A clear sense of who's in charge and who's expected to do what also helps.

#### Choice

A sense of ownership reduces anxiety. On the training pitch, provide variety and rotate activities. Create opportunities to problem solve. In a classroom, build in choice. Allow people to have their say. Little things matter. On trips abroad, who chooses the leisure activities, the videos, the food? When there's a sense of ownership participation goes up and inhibition down.

#### Relaxed but purposeful environment

Former FA technical Director Howard Wilkinson said 'high risk games tend to get low risk strategies'. This is all about perception. Creativity is inhibited by coercive coaching styles and over-coaching. It is also inhibited by approval seeking

cultures. Humans will take risks when they don't fear reprisals. If you wish your players to be creative, create a relaxed but purposeful coaching environment.

#### Spaced rehearsal

To get better at anything requires practice but not all practice helps you get better! Bingeing on performance doesn't allow space for improvement. In any coaching environment a little and often is best. The brain needs downtime to sort new information.

#### Limit the surprises

Too much information at the wrong time doesn't get remembered. Confuse your players with too many last minute changes, or too many instructions at half time, and you ramp up the anxiety levels. As the week before a Saturday match goes on, the number of additional points of information you add should diminish. Players will remember more clearly the information which has been rehearsed, acted on during training and prompted when its needed.

#### Avoid cognitive overload

Humans in high anxiety situations can only take on so much new data. Don't bamboozle players with an excess of information. Remember that some players are better at absorbing new information than others. To make it easier for everyone, use a see, hear and do approach. Don't just do it – talk about it before and after. Show the routine and plays you want, get them to discuss. Doing it this way increases the chances of it being remembered when its needed.

#### Self-talk

Some players talk themselves into stress. They allow a little internal voice of doubt to take over. They can talk themselves in to what is called 'learned helplessness'. This habit of mind can start early in life and with repetition becomes 'learned'. It's not helpful. Encourage positive self-talk in your players. Model it yourself!

#### Positive mental rehearsal

Alongside positive self-talk is positive mental rehearsal. Your players should practice visualisation. Not everyone takes to it like Jonny Wilkinson but for some it will help get them mentally attuned to the coaching session or match which is to follow.

#### Constructive feedback

To become a better performer you need to know how. Be specific in the feedback you give and frame the feedback in terms of improvement. In a multi-cultural sporting environment criticism can have its limitations. If you must criticise then focus on the behaviour and not on the individual.

Tunnel vision can occur in moments of high stress. The focus of attention narrows and what's going on around passes. The best coaches understand that creating the right conditions for learning goes along way to getting out of the tunnel.