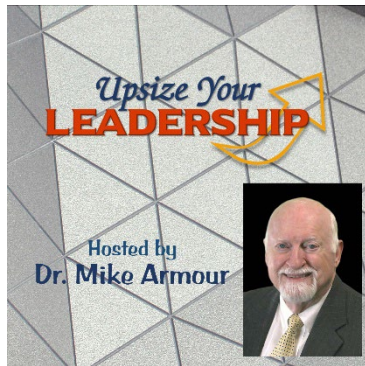


# Improving Your Performance at Improving Performance

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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As a manager or leader, are you ever frustrated with subpar performance by someone you oversee? For anyone with a reasonably extended tenure in management, the answer is usually, “Yes.” Well, when that happens, how do you respond? How do you deal with inadequate performance by those who fall under your management purview? We’re going to delve into that question today.

It’s no news to you that you’re pursuing your work as leader in a performance-driven world. You’re constantly reminded that your duty is to hit certain numbers. A certain level of sales. A certain volume of output. A certain net revenue.

Performance is therefore a never-ending concern for you. First, your own performance. Then the performance of your team. As a manager, much of your time is given to tweaking performance. How valuable would it be, then, if you could increase your performance at increasing performance? Today I will share some thoughts aimed at helping you do that very thing.

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Forty years ago Timothy Gallwey wrote a book whose title seemed to target a very narrow reading audience. To be specific, people who enjoyed playing tennis and were serious about improving their game. The name of his book was *The Inner World of Tennis*.

But in short order, people from all walks of life were reading it, not because they necessarily loved tennis. Many of them had no interest in the sport at all. But the principles which he laid out helped them perform at a higher level in their own sphere of activity. Eventually over a million copies of the book were in circulation.

The broad receptivity to Gallwey’s book led him to produce others related to specific sports – books about the inner world of golf and skiing. Then he branched into non-athletic fields, such as music and stress management.

In all of his works, however, he anchored his overall message to one concept. The concept can be expressed as a formula. When written out, the formula begins with a capital P and an equals symbol, followed by a lower-case p, a minus sign, and a lower case i. Or if you would, big P equals little p minus little i. These letters stand for the equation “Performance equals potential minus interference.”

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Gallwey believed that every human being has far more potential than his or her performance typically manifests. What stifles their potential is not necessarily lack of motivation or lack of ability, but some type of interference which holds their potential in check. Remove the interference, he argued, and a person's full potential blossoms.

### Internal Interference

Gallwey's books focus on interference which arises from the internal dialogue that all of us carry on continuously. Thus his emphasis on the "inner world" in his book titles. The nature and quality of this inner dialogue, he says, determines our level of performance.

To illustrate, everyone occasionally makes careless mistakes which lead to rather unpleasant consequences. When that happens to us, what do we say to ourselves? Do we have an inner voice that calls us stupid? Or perhaps we mutter inside, "This is so frustrating. I'll never get this job done." Or maybe we ask, "Why do I always seem to mess things up?" I dare say that you can recall plenty of times when you have talked to yourself just this way.

This instinctive type of internal dialogue, in Gallwey's view, distracts us from what deserves our careful attention if we are to perform well. And many times, this destructive internal dialogue has to do with limiting beliefs about ourselves. "I can't speak well in front of a group." Or "I'm just a slow learner when it comes to understanding mechanical things." In my coaching career I've seen clients do things which they never dreamed possible once they rid themselves of such potential-killing interference. They became an embodiment of Gallwey's performance formula.

One person who follows this formula religiously is Myles Downey. He details the implications of the formula in his book *Effective Coaching*. (Incidentally, if you're going to read only one book to enhance your coaching skills as a manager, this is one which I would definitely recommend. Again, the author is Myles Downey. The first name is spelled M-Y-L-E-S. And the title is *Effective Coaching*.)

In this small, highly-practical volume, Downey explains how he illustrates Gallwey's principle when teaching courses on coaching. The exercise generally goes something like this. He asks if there is someone in the room who has always found it difficult to catch a ball. Since there are typically 50 or more people in his classes, he is statistically assured that at least one person in the group has long faced this challenge.

He asks if the person would be willing to participate in a little demonstration with him. Next he brings the volunteer to the front of the room and positions the two of them some distance apart. Once they are in place, he says, "I'm going to toss you a tennis ball, and I want you to catch it."

He then proceeds to lob tennis balls slowly, one at a time, in the person's direction. Sure enough, the volunteer misses most, if not all of them. Downey then asks, "That last ball – was it spinning backward or forward when it got to you?" The answer, of course, is "I don't know." He replies, "Well, watch closely this time and tell me what you see." He then tosses another ball and asks the question again. Usually the person says something like, "I don't know. I think it was spinning backwards." "Okay," he continues, "let's try another one and see if you can know for sure this time."

Once his volunteer can determine the direction of spin, Downey asks whether the person noticed the brand name stamped on the ball as it was approaching. In all likelihood, the answer is, "No." He then says, "Can you see it this time" and lobs another ball. As this exercise

continues, it is suddenly apparent that the volunteer is effortlessly catching one ball after another.

### Removing Interference

What has happened? Notice that Downey did not try to improve the person's ball-catching skill by offering instructions on technique. Any person with average eye-hand coordination, he knows, has the innate ability to catch a ball. It wasn't lack of ability which prevented better ball-catching performance. It was inner dialogue which was saying things to the effect of "I'm going to embarrass myself by missing these balls in front of all of these people" or "I just can't catch balls like other people." The interference of this dialogue is preventing undivided attention on catching the ball.

Downey did not try to surface these limiting beliefs and combat them directly. He simply crowded this self-limiting self-talk aside by giving the mind something else to focus on. He asked questions which forced his volunteer to concentrate on the ball as it approached. Concentrate as he or she had never done before. Gallwey knows that if people pay riveted attention to the object which they want to catch, the body's natural eye-hand coordination will kick in and direct their hands to the proper catching position. In effect, he eliminated the interference by pushing it aside by tasking the mind with other duties.

### External Interference

As their titles imply, Gallwey's books center on internal interference with performance. But interference can also be external. Weak performance may be rooted in a variety of external realities facing a worker. Lack of opportunity or lack of meaningful challenge. Structural impediments in the way things are organized. A corporate culture which discourages risk-taking by trying something new. External interference abounds everywhere in organizational life.

Let's therefore broaden the application of the performance formula. As a manager or leader, you may not be equipped yet to counter a worker's internal interference in the artful way that Downey demonstrates. But you are certainly capable of identifying external interference which is choking back what the worker is truly capable of doing.

When we see someone's untapped potential, our first question should be, "How is it possible that they are not performing up to their potential already?" That starts us down the path to uncovering the interference which hinders peak performance.

By focusing on the problem of interference, we avoid the mistake of falling back on default explanations for non-performance, such as, "He's just lazy" or "She's simply not motivated." These default explanations are subtle forms of the blame game and place the onus for weak performance entirely on the person in question. When we default to these explanations as leaders and managers, we absolve ourselves of responsibility for the situation. As a result, our efforts to remedy the problem revolve around exhorting people to do better or staging a motivational event or putting people on performance improvement plans. Yet, if we don't remove the interference, such efforts have little chance of lasting success.

On the other hand, when we approach poor performance by looking for interference, then working to remove it, our perspective on the problem changes completely. And with this shift in perspective, we assume responsibility ourselves for identifying and eliminating whatever is interfering with stellar performance.

Years ago, one of my mentors noted that weak performance boils down to three root causes. Either the person lacks a “how to” – that is, the person either does not know the techniques required for a task or is unskilled in those techniques. Or there is lack of a “want to” – the person simply has little or no desire to do the task. Or the problem is lack of a “chance to” – the person is constrained by external circumstances from performing the task.

I’ve since added a fourth category: the lack of a “have to.” Certain things left undone lead to such dire consequences that we feel compelled to do them, no matter how much we dislike them and how little we desire to do them.

My mentor then offered the following rules of thumb for coping with these scenarios. If the issue is lack of a “how to,” the remedy is training. If the issue is lack of a “want to,” the issue is motivation. If the issue is lack of a “chance to,” the remedy is structural change or changes in roles and responsibilities. For purpose of this wrap-up, I’ll set aside the lack of a “have to.” Wise managers know that they don’t foster the best performance from people by intentionally putting them in situations where they have to perform or else.

### **A New Perspective on Underperformance**

My point in reiterating my mentor’s analysis is that interference with performance is multi-faceted. It arises from numerous factors, some of them external, some of them internal. Managers who want to bring out the best in their people – and wise managers always do – need to develop the habit of seeing performance issues through the lens of Gallwey’s performance formula.

This calls for managers to set aside any form of the blame game and instead to approach performance problems with a genuine spirit of curiosity. Their first instinct should be to ask, “What impediments are holding back higher performance, and what can I do to remove those impediments?” This spirit of curiosity and inquiry serves to put us on a learning curve, which is solution-oriented and forward looking rather than finding ourselves stuck helplessly in the blame game.

How would it change your perspective on a worker’s weak performance if you routinely viewed it through the framework of big P equals little p minus little i? And equally important, how would it change your sense of duty as a manager if you focused consistently on looking for ways to remove performance-killing interference rather than simply exhorting people to perform better?

This is not to downplay the importance of being motivational and inspirational as a leader. Rather, my purpose is to help you understand why motivation and inspiration are not always enough.

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*Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

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