

1 ATTITUDE

"Life shrinks or expands according to one's courage."

ANAIS NIN

"Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."

JUNG

"Failure is a bruise, not a tattoo."

"Chance favours the prepared mind."

PASTEUR

A sunny disposition is worth more than fortune. Young people should know that it can be cultivated; that the mind like the body can be moved from the shade into the sunshine."

ANDREW CARNEGIE

Behaviour follows attitude and so it feels appropriate to start with some stories about attitude. When it comes to performance, attitude, and mindset, are massive contributing factors. Time spent here is very worthwhile.

The first story is a very personal one, about a challenging time of my life when I was looking proper failure in the face for probably the first time.

Failing my first year and what happened next

I did well at maths at school. It was like problem solving and doing puzzles, though I'm not sure how much I really understood it.

At A-level I had a maths teacher whose students were challenged to sink or swim. Despite (or because of?) his uncompromising style I got an A which played a big part in me getting into Loughborough to do a joint honours degree in PE (Sports Science) and Maths

However the first year of degree maths was hard! I would sit in lectures on some subjects not understanding anything. Nothing. Much of it was gobbledegook. I know I got a bit dispirited.

At the end of the first year, to progress to year two, you had to average 40% in the end of year exams and not get lower than 30% on any single exam. When the results came out I had scored 15% on one paper! 15%!!! And it wasn't in a subject that I thought I would do that badly in. I was horrified. I was shocked and scared that I would get thrown out. My thoughts kept going to my parents and what they would think.

To my (partial) relief I was offered a potential way out. I was asked to attend a viva – an oral interview exam – with the tutor for that particular subject, plus the overall course tutor and a third lecturer, Stan Sherman, who was quirky and likeable and had always been friendly towards me. Mr Sherman had told us on day one that completing a degree was less about the knowledge acquired and more about what it said for our ability to study, learn and persevere. I think he was right.

So the interview felt like a big deal with a lot riding on it. It felt like there was everything to lose and I was a nervous wreck. It was only by convincing myself that they wanted to let me through to the second year anyway that I overcame my nerves enough to turn up and say my name at the start. After all, they could have simply failed me and not given me this second chance.

They told me to take my time, writing down anything I wanted to on a pad of paper before answering their questions. I couldn't answer the first question, having to say, "I'm sorry, I don't know". They said "ok, let's go back to basics and start with a simpler one". I couldn't answer anything as I couldn't think. Finally, at the end, Stan Sherman asked his only question – an easy set up – which I was able to get right. My memory is that it was the only question I answered.

So when they let me through, 'relieved' was not the word. I was so much more than that. I was determined not to go through that trauma again. So at the start of the second year I resolved *to be the perfect student*. I've no idea where that came from. But it worked.

Being *the perfect student* meant several things to me. It meant still enjoying student life: socialising, going to the pub and playing sports. It meant playing a little less cards and watching less rubbish on TV, so less time wasted. And it meant in lectures, asking questions and doing any recommended extra reading, sometimes asking if there was anything else to do. In practice, the attitude led to discipline and application.

A boy called Stephen Thomas joined us in our second year having failed his first year and retaken it. When I was sitting at the front of a lecture, making notes, asking questions and trying to be *the perfect student*, he would look at me thinking I was nuts, and not able to work me out. It was a strategy – the perfect student bit – that was part attitude, part act and part way of motivating myself.

At the end of my second year, which counted 40% of my degree, I got a 2:2 and was delighted. In my final year I worked harder still - to try and keep up with other course mates - and in the end I got a 2:1.

The whole experience taught me so much: the importance of attitude, that I could work hard and maybe that I was lucky too. Whilst they weren't lessons that I applied from then on every day to everything I did (I can be a slow learner) they were things that served me well in the future.

I don't know where choosing an attitude, let alone "be a perfect student" came from. But, with hindsight, it was my first definite and clear example of deliberately choosing my mindset and

afterwards on reflection being confident that it made a significant difference to my behaviour.

Jim's story about his classmates reminded me of a particular experience in my own school career. I was in the final year of my very small primary school; I'd always been at the top end of the class in terms of academic ability, but my terrible handwriting, poor maths skills, and tendency to get distracted often played against me. However, with only 14 of us in our year group and mixed age-classes, I don't think I'd stood out particularly.

For some reason, that changed in our final year, as my friend Liz and I started to be called 'swots', 'nerds' and 'geeks' by our classmates. It was a bit upsetting, but our parents were keen for us to work hard and focus on the move to secondary school, knowing that we were the only two of our class who wanted to go to the local girls-only high school. They advised us to ignore the name-calling and tried to encourage us to see these expressions as thinly disguised admiration, or jealousy.

One day around this time, the class took a maths test. Despite me having no great skills in maths, one of my classmates copied my answers and shared them with the other girls. When the results were handed out and it turned out my answer was wrong, they all turned and blamed me for ruining their tests.

I'm not sure I realised at the time that I should only be answerable to myself for my performance and not anyone else. In hindsight, however, it's pretty clear! One more lesson from this – if you have a maths question, ask Jim!

I really like the idea of choosing who you are going to be at work, choosing your attitude.

What would the 'perfect performer' in your role look like?

Is it someone who does everything you do, or is it someone who does things differently?

Is attitude nature or nurture?

In Mind Games, Annie

Vernon talks about how elite athletes get into their optimum mental state to perform.

Here's what she writes:

"This book explores how each sportsperson will have become intimately acquainted with the contents of their head through trial and error, mistakes and reflection.

What we will discover in this book is that this process, or working out how to train mental skills such that each athlete finds their optimum, is entirely individual.

It's part nature, part nurture, part training."

In my experience, I would completely agree. It's part who you are (your personality and character traits you were born with), part how you were shaped and part – and I would believe this given the development role I do – training. I think you can train mental skills to help you find your optimum level.

All three elements play a part. And there's not much anyone can do with the nature bit (apart

from nurture and train it).

I've always assumed my competitive nature was down to having a big brother I was constantly trying to keep up with. I'd always want to beat him- and anyone else! I remember struggling up hills as a kid on a family bike ride in Herefordshire, lagging behind so much that the others would have to slow down for me to catch up. Except when I would realise we were nearly at the end – at which point I would have a burst of energy and sprint-pedal towards home so I could be the first one back!

As an adult, I joined a gym at one point and was going several times a week. After a few months I mentioned that I was going in a conversation with my parents, and they asked why I was going. I said that I wanted to see if I could. They were baffled and asked what my end-goal was, whether to lose weight or for a specific goal. Again, it wasn't any of those things. Just going and trying to improve on my previous efforts – essentially competing with myself - was enough to motivate me every time. I didn't need to find any other stimulus or focus to push myself.

What drives you to work hard and try to improve? Is it competitiveness, a desire to be better, or do you need something more?

What can you add into the mix that helps?

Involuntary redundancy and ways to cope

When I was about 37 or 38, I had three young children and what felt like a big mortgage. Life was ticking along nicely and all was well. We were living in the south-west of England with plenty of friends but a long way from parents or any other family.

Then my job got made redundant. I choose my words here. I wasn't redundant. But the job I did was.

Whilst it wasn't a complete surprise, when it actually happened, it was still a nasty shock and left me feeling a bit out of control, uncertain and anxious.

One of the things that helped me was deciding I would aim to *be a role model employee whose job was being made redundant*. This meant:

- Choosing my response – I remember going to babysit for the evening at a friend's house and taking Stephen Covey's 7 Habits book, which I'd read just a few years before, to help me think about what I wanted
- Being brilliant at taking all the outplacement support that my employer offered, which was considerable
- Learning along the way – about what would happen and what I might want next
- Working hard to stay confident – reminding myself I was as good as I was the day before the announcement, backing myself to get a new job, telling myself I only needed one job

- Using the phrase “perfect is possible” to myself. Perfect is possible meaning the scenario where I got some redundancy money, had some time not working while still being paid, and getting a new job to start as soon as the existing one ended
- Keep working hard until the end in my job and not burning any bridges
- Being a role model to my colleagues and supporting those in a similar position – if this sounds cocky or generous it was neither really. It was designed to help me cope. I’m not sure if it helped them but I hope it did

I tell this story to show how an attitude and a strategy – in this case “*be a role model*” – can drive behaviour and get to a better outcome.

I’ve learnt since that many people get made redundant from roles. It’s not personal. People may subsequently go through a month, two, three, six, a year or two before getting another job. Who knows? But eventually they do get another one. And however many or few jobs are around, you only need one.

Many, many people whose job is made redundant look back and with hindsight say it wasn’t the worst thing that could have happened, and even that it was a good thing, because it prompted a positive change.

Like Jim, I’ve also been placed in a redundancy situation during my career. It’s a tough experience to go through – and it can be a challenging subject to have conversations about. There is still plenty of stigma out there about letting people know you’ve been made redundant, particularly new employers. However, in the world we live in now, most people will experience a redundancy at some point in their careers. So many of us identify strongly with our work and use that identity as a marker for success and confidence. Losing that unexpectedly and suddenly can be very disorientating and demoralising.

One of the things I was struck by when it happened to me was just how many people reached out to me, either to offer support, share their stories, or to just listen. Jim was one of them, and his wise words and support were invaluable. I can tell you that he absolutely does live up to his aim of being a role model for others.

Have you ever been made redundant?

Who reached out to support you?

If you’ve ever had to make someone redundant, it can be an even harder topic to discuss. Most companies don’t fly George Clooney in to deliver the awful news – it’s usually down to the manager who knows that person or team best. You will have a strong sense of how the news is likely to affect those to be made redundant, both professionally and personally, but as ‘the bad guy’ you’re not ‘supposed’ to be affected by it – the focus is rightly on supporting the person being made redundant. After all, “that’s what you’re paid the ‘big bucks’ for!”

Now, I don't know where these ideas about how I should feel came from, but I can guarantee you that they're not in any HR handbook! In fact, I don't think I've ever seen any rules about how you should feel when you make someone redundant – and I imagine that is because most people will feel terrible about it - which isn't really something you can write in your HR policies.

How 'should' you feel if you are forced to make a colleague redundant?

What kind of support would you need, and how would you want to respond to the situation?

The relative importance of knowledge, skills and attitude and which to work on

At the age of 32, I got a job in a training team, which was a career defining move.

I'd been invited to apply for a role by Damon, the Sales Training team manager. Early on Damon wrote on a flipchart the three words: Knowledge, Skills and Attitude. He told me that we train knowledge – like product knowledge – and that we could test what had been learned (and therefore evaluate how good our training had been). He told me that we also trained skills – like sales skills – but that this was harder to evaluate, especially in real customer situations. Finally he told me – as I recall - that we didn't train attitude.

Many years later I was becoming increasingly interested in the psychology of sales. Where I worked at that time, if you talked about the psychology of sales, the conversation would be about the interaction between buyer and seller. But for some reason I was much more interested in the performance psychology of the seller.

About then, I discovered that one of the new sales consultants that I had helped to run an induction programme for, was an elite level athlete. I took the opportunity to ask him if he had ever worked with a sports psychologist. He said he hadn't so I asked him if he would like to work with me. "I didn't know you were a sports psychologist, Jim", he replied. "I'm not", I said, "but I'm really interested to learn!".

And so he and I started talking about the mental side of his running. I should note that he was an experienced competitor and I didn't feel I was going to screw him up! I did have a bit of a scare though one lunchtime when I arranged to meet a local, newly qualified sports psyche working at a local college of further education. She told me I should have a written contract and all sorts of things in place in case our work made his running worse! I dashed back to work and urgently approached him and told him what she'd said. He laughed and was chilled. "Nah Jim, we're cool".

I think he quite enjoyed talking to me about his running. I was keen and interested and I'd like to think that the conversations helped him too.

In one of our first meetings – maybe the first – I wrote down

- Natural ability
- Health and fitness
- Mindset and attitude

and I asked him to put percentages against these three things in terms of their importance.

"At my level", he said (and that feels relevant) it's 5% natural ability ("We're all quick. That's how we got into sprinting"), 15% health and fitness ("We all train hard and look after ourselves") and 80% in your head ("At the moment the gun goes off").

Now in research terms, this is a sample size of one! But I was stunned, enthused and even more curious. There must be something in the mental thing, I thought.

My challenge became how to integrate what I knew, and what I was thinking, into my work. I created an opportunity by discussing with my internal client, the Regional Manager of Sales in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and his management team. They agreed I could do a slot at the next meeting of the 30 or so sales consultants and managers.

I was well prepared but felt like I was taking a risk. I was putting my credibility (what credibility I had) on the line and some of them were tough old, experienced, round-the-block sales consultants.

I remember clearly standing up at the front and after about 10 seconds of my presentation thinking “oh my goodness, what are you doing?” quickly followed by “you have to go on”. That “you have to go on” was unplanned, simple and very effective self-talk.

And the risk paid off, the content landed, the comments were favourable and my confidence took a lift. It was one of several significant career and work developments at that time.

Whether it's trying to decipher what a rugby or tennis player has written on their wristbands or a post-match interviewer asking “What went through your mind during that moment?”; the opportunity of a glimpse into someone else's self-talk and attitude is always intriguing.

I'm pretty certain that back in humanity's cave-dwelling era, one of the questions from the fireside audience enraptured by the tale of a mighty hunt would have been “Were you scared?” And whether the answer was affirmative or not, it was probably followed by a “but then I remembered how hungry I was/you all are...”

We all use self-talk, whether it is positive or negative – and whether we listen to it or not! I'm sure we've all had moments like Jim, where we tell ourselves “you have to go on” in challenging situations.

**One of my favourite answers to this question was back in 2003, when the England rugby union side played New Zealand in Wellington a few months before their now-infamous World Cup win. England had two forwards sin-binned at a crucial period in the match, and were defending their try line against the New Zealand scrum. You never want to be a man down in the scrum, let alone two, yet England managed to hold out and win the game, an incredibly rare victory on All Blacks soil. After the game, the ever dour-looking captain and lock Martin Johnson was interviewed, and asked what was going through his mind during that infamous scrummage. He responded simply: “My spine.”*

What is your self-talk like, and how do you use it to your advantage?

Trusting the process (as an attitude)

By trust the process I mean, adopt a mindset which means you can approach a task in a prepared, relaxed and confident frame of mind. It means trusting that the process you have planned, and know, and have maybe used before, is one that will lead to a desirable

outcome; whether that outcome is a goal, or a discovery or simply an end point.

In coaching I often use the process GROW or (T)GROW which stands for (Topic), Goal, (current) Reality, Options and Wrap up (or What next or Will (motivation)). It's a process that doesn't necessarily need to be used sequentially.

I once coached someone who had lodged an official grievance against what they believed to be the unfair, biased behaviour of a boss.

I told them about a time when my wife and I owned a house where we wanted to build an extension over our garage. When we told our neighbour about our plans they weren't happy because they thought it would affect the light onto their property. I felt the impact on them would be minimal.

We really felt we needed and wanted the extra space but I was equally keen not to fall out with my neighbour. I had seen that before in a previous house we had lived in where next-door neighbours living near us had fallen out terribly. They were an old couple and next door a young couple with a young baby. It got very petty, very awkward and quite unpleasant for everyone. The young couple had lots of friends round socialising and the old couple would often have their peace disturbed. One day the old man woke his young neighbours up in the early hours saying his wife was extremely ill and they must come and help. It wasn't true, and he just wanted them to experience how bad it was to be woken up. Relationships deteriorated further.

So my neighbour and I managed to talk about our situation and what we were both after. We managed to agree that I would apply, that he would object and we would see where the planning process took us.

Our first application was rejected, his objection was upheld. We were in the process of rethinking our plans to re-apply when events overtook us and we moved house, out of the city, to a small market town be closer to a better secondary school.

That was the story.

When I finished my coaching with the coachee, he told me that this story had really helped him with the grievance process. It helped him to focus on what he could control, to think more and not to react.

In high performance circles, where a team or individual has thoroughly prepared, 'trusting the process' enables them to choose a particular mindset, to relax, to deal with unhelpful nerves, and to perform to the best of their ability.

A few years back, having signed up with a local cat shelter and had a home inspection, I was expecting to wait a month or two before my name reached the top of the waiting list to adopt some kittens. One Friday morning a week or so after the inspection, I got a call at work asking me to come to a vet practice the following morning as there was a litter of five kittens needing homes immediately.

Having made a few emergency purchases, I arrived at the vets the next morning and was ushered into a back room by a charity volunteer to choose my kittens. I knew I could only take two, and they were all boys. So I sat on the floor, and a rather adventurous ginger tom kitten came to play with the toy I was flicking for him to chase. Great, I'd have him.

The second choice was tougher, but a little grey tabby intrigued me. He was clearly watching his ginger brother play, creeping nearer to get a better view and suss me out, but not getting involved. Eventually I chose him as I thought he was intelligent, and off home we went.

What I didn't quite realise was that having been found in the wild and then being in the back room of a vets rather than in a foster home meant that the kittens weren't very used to humans. Much as I wanted to cuddle them and stroke them to reassure them, on the first day I barely got close enough to touch them occasionally.

I won over the ginger kitten pretty quickly, but his brother was tougher. I couldn't take time off work, but every evening, I'd come home and sit on the kitchen floor and play with them, let them climb over me, and stroke them whenever they weren't looking. It was frustratingly slow in those early days, but at the same time I trusted that if I invested enough of the things I could control – time, play, and attention – they'd eventually let me stroke them. And in time, it did work.

Now I am constantly supervised by one or the other, they regularly demand attention, and I get ferociously meowed at if I don't go to bed when the tabby thinks I should (!) – so maybe I was too successful!

When have you had to trust the process and focus on doing what was in your control? How did it work out for you?

“Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard”

The heading to this story is a quote attributed to a US basketball coach called Tim Nokte. Like many good quotes it is both memorable and has meaning.

Of course if you are talented and work hard – as the coach implies – you stand a good chance of making the most of your talent.

I once heard Michael Johnson, the great American sprinter, unequalled in the 200m and 400m interviewed on the radio. He was asked about his physical running style (he had a distinctive upright posture) and his mental toughness (for which he was renowned). Which was most important he was asked, the physical or mental? 'Both', he replied, 'both are important'.

The interviewer went on to ask a question near the end about whether there was a secret to his success? 'Yes, there is', he said. I could sense everyone listening to the radio at that moment leaning in to hear his answer a bit more clearly, just like I was.

He went on to explain that when he went to college (university) he joined the track and field (athletics) programme and that there were training sessions two or three times a week.

'I went to them all', he said.

And that was the 'secret of his success'. I took away from the interview his commitment to his sport, his hard work and his consistency.

When I was younger, I had the fortune (or misfortune) to be a member of my local Air Cadet squadron. It was unusually small and somewhat more relaxed than most squadrons would have been, which probably suited me very well. I enjoyed going twice a week and the opportunities – flying, gliding, target shooting, camps and so on – that came with being a member.

As a cadet, you not only had a series of exams and training to pass that offered status badges, you could also be promoted to leadership positions and help take charge of squadron activities and drill (marching). Because I showed up every week, followed the rules and passed my exams, I also found myself getting promoted regularly.

In a different squadron I might not have achieved as many promotions, but my commitment to showing up and working hard meant I was rewarded regularly.

I'm no Michael Johnson(!), but what I learned was as valuable for me as it was for him; by consistently showing up, working hard, and being committed to what you do, you can succeed.

<p>What have you committed to in order to achieve success? What did making that commitment teach you about yourself?</p>
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Enjoying yourself and having fun at work

We are all wired differently as a result of personality, upbringing, culture and values. I know I can be quite serious at times though also possess a sense of humour – of sorts.

To me work can be serious but not all the time. My memories of some of the best teams I have ever worked in include those of all the times we laughed together.

Enjoying yourself at work needn't be at the expense of doing a great job. Sometimes it even adds to the level of performance you are able to produce. Not 'larking around', but deliberately having a good time.

Years ago a colleague and I were working for two days with a very introverted team of technical experts. At the end of day one we were tired. Trying to generate responses and discussion had proved really hard work.

On the walk back to our hotel we talked about the day and our strategy for day two. We came up with two things:

1. Don't ask any questions of the whole group, especially open questions (not easy for us because this was our common practice)
- 2, Look to enjoy ourselves in the room and working together at the front of the group

Both tactics seemed to work well and not only was the room not full of tumbleweed silences but we had a good time as well – while absolutely looking to do our best work for the team. They seemed to enjoy it more too.

This might seem like a strange discovery – that seeking enjoyment can make everything better – but a discovery it is for many of us. Or is it just me?

My brother once worked for an organisation that moved across the country to a purpose-built office. He gleefully told me that he'd managed to organise a paper aeroplane competition in their new atrium, under the guise of getting people to enjoy their new environment and teambuilding.

Although he felt like he'd 'got away' with something that wasn't quite 'proper' work, it probably did exactly what he said it would – enabled his colleagues to connect, relax and enjoy themselves after the stress of the big move and settling into the new office.

At work, I often run discussion panels, virtual watercoolers and workshops that seem like quite light-hearted fun sessions. They're actually carefully designed to encourage colleagues to share their knowledge and wisdom and to start conversations across teams. The biggest challenge is persuading my colleagues that just because they're enjoying themselves, doesn't mean they're not also doing productive work!

Have you ever felt as if you couldn't be doing 'proper' productive work if you're enjoying yourself?

What makes you feel that way?

Even brain surgeons need downtime to reflect with colleagues, tell stories, and learn–

So what is stopping you enjoying yourself at work (even if only at the appropriate moment)?

Ways to get mentally ready

As mentioned earlier, I first started taking a proper interest in performance psychology in about 2001 when I was working with a colleague, now a friend, who was an accomplished

sprinter. I hadn't initially realised how good he was but I learned that he was an international and Commonwealth games athlete.

As told earlier, I asked him if he'd ever worked with a sports psychologist? "No", he replied "but I would be interested to". "Would you like to work with me?" I asked, slightly hesitantly. "I didn't know you were a sports psychologist Jim", he said. "I'm not", I admitted "but I'm keen to learn!".

So the two of us began, fairly regularly, talking about the mental side of his running. He was already an experienced athlete in his late 20s and had lots of experience to draw on. We would talk about goals, and mindset, and how to think.

I remember our first conversation well and talking about two things.

Firstly, I asked him about 1. Natural ability 2. Health and fitness and 3. Mindset and attitude. I said if you had to apportion percentages to these three things to indicate their importance, what would you say?

He replied, "at my level", it's 5% natural ability ("we're all naturally quick – that's how we got into sprinting", 15% health and fitness ("we all look after ourselves and train hard") and 80% mindset and attitude ("at the moment the gun goes off it's all in your head").

I was pretty astounded. (I would point out to the reader that in research terms this is a sample size of one.)

Secondly, I asked him, how he gets himself mentally ready.

Within a minute or two I had written down 17 different things that he said he did to get ready. I was a keen learner and note taker and still have the piece of paper in the front leaf of a book (it's possible I double counted one in more than one category). I asked him where he learned these things and he said a mixture of places: from others, from just picking things up and from seeing what worked for him. Basically, word of mouth, copying and trial and error. Three tried and tested learning methods!

Most of all I was interested that he had *learned* them.

Later, in reading up on these things (in the Sports Psychology book where the piece of paper is kept), I came to see them as a mix of thought control strategies, emotional control strategies, behavioural strategies and attentional focus strategies.

17 things to get ready for a 10 second race!

In my rugby playing days, I was never the fittest member of the team. I certainly wasn't the fastest, and probably wasn't the strongest either. I was probably the most likely person to turn up – and to be honest, that can take you quite a long way in itself! The team I played for had a great atmosphere, but it had an ethos I hadn't come across anywhere else. Every player on that team was absolutely determined to push themselves to their limits. One of the stock phrases you'd hear at training, particularly during pre-

season, was “train until you’re sick.”

At the time, none of us seemed to have any idea that this wasn’t a healthy attitude. A few years later a group of us were talking and one former player explained they’d started a new sport that all their new fellow participants took seriously.

“Ah,” I said. “Train until you’re sick?”

“No.” said my former teammate. “Apparently that’s not a healthy attitude and other people find it quite shocking.”

Being in our own little bubble had given us some really good mental strategies as a team – but also some really bad ones! Someone else’s perspective on your approach can be really valuable.

Have you ever explained your mental preparation – whether for work, sport, or anything else – to an outsider to get their perspective?

How did that help you understand how you need to approach mental preparation for what you need to do?