

The Greatest Show on Earth: Applying the Psychology of Peak Performance to Live Music

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Abstract

This paper aims to apply models of peak performance to the field of music performance. It discusses a case study concerning a performing musician and explores ways of enhancing the quality of their live performance at an upcoming concert and beyond. The case study examines three interactive performance phases—pre-performance, performance, and post-performance (Gardner and Moore 2007).

In the pre-performance phase, Loehr and Schwartz's (2001) High-Performance Pyramid provides a useful framework for assessing and enhancing the cognitive, affective, and physiological states that lead to peak performance, as well as countering the potentially negative effects of dispositional and environmental characteristics and performance demands. A mindful approach to the performance phase, using Gardner and Moore's (2007) Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment approach, is then explored.

In the post-performance phase, ongoing coaching seeks to continue the process of enhancing cognitive, affective, and physiological states, sustaining mindfulness, revisiting values, goals, and motivations, as well as focusing on enhancing self-efficacy in the wake of a poor performance.

Finally, it is suggested that investigating the emotional states that comprise a performer's Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning (Hanin 1997) may provide a useful preparation tool for future shows.

Keywords: peak performance, artist, music, mindfulness, psychological skills training, music industry studies, music performance studies

Case Study

Shane is the singer/guitarist in The Lovely Lads,¹ a rock band. The band has been performing for ten years, and is now experiencing rapidly increasing popularity. The band has undertaken numerous live tours and is about to play the biggest headline show of its career at Sydney's Enmore Theatre ("the Enmore"). While there is pressure to perform well at every show, this audience will contain many new fans whose ongoing support may depend entirely on the quality of this performance.

Shane is the linch-pin of the band, taking care of songwriting and promotional duties, and serving as the focus of live performances. Despite being a deep-thinking introvert, Shane is a compelling frontman and numerous recent performances have enthralled audiences. However, on two occasions, Shane made a mistake (e.g., fluffing the guitar intro to a song), leading to a marked decline in performance quality. Shane disengaged from the audience and the band, mumbled the words to the remaining songs, made subsequent mistakes and left the stage at the end of the show without a word.

A good performance entails entertaining the audience—not only by playing the songs well, but also (and perhaps more importantly than avoiding mistakes) by having well-mixed sound (provided by the band's sound engineer, and assessed during a pre-performance soundcheck as well as the opening songs of the performance), by engaging and connecting with the audience, and by giving an energetic performance that reflects the artist's own authentic enjoyment of, and enthusiasm for, the performance.

The goal of the proposed performance coaching is to successfully deliver a strong performance at the Enmore, and support a consistently high level of performance at future shows, regardless of any mistakes Shane makes.

Introduction

According to Gardner and Moore (2007), performance enhancement is best addressed across three interactive phases: pre-performance, performance, and post-performance. Within these three phases, the "right combination

of cognitive, affective and physiological conditions allows well-learned skills to occur in a seemingly effortless and automatic manner,” (Gardner and Moore 2007, 4) leading to an ideal performance state.

This paper addresses the case study across these three phases, exploring aspects of ongoing performance coaching in each area that can enhance the artist’s performance both at the Enmore and on an ongoing basis. In particular, there are two points of focus. Firstly, the coaching aims to help the artist improve overall performance in the live setting, and most notably at the Enmore. Secondly, the coaching aims to address the specific barrier to peak performance posed by the tendency for Shane’s performance to deteriorate considerably after making an obvious mistake.

Discussion:

Pre-performance Phase

Loehr and Schwartz’s (2001) High-Performance Pyramid (HPP) provides a useful model in the pre-performance phase for considering how the physical, emotional, cognitive, and spiritual states most conducive to optimal performance might be cultivated.

The HPP comprises four levels of human capacity—physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual—that must be nurtured in order to achieve the Ideal Performance State in which peak performance occurs (Loehr and Schwartz 2001). This model reflects a tenet of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci 2017, 2000) that contends individuals have three basic innate psychological needs—autonomy, relatedness, and competence—that must be satisfied for optimal performance to occur. The HPP model stresses the importance of managing and renewing one’s energies in all four capacities, and of balancing stress and recovery, proposing the implementation of ritual behaviors to facilitate the necessary oscillation between the two (Loehr and Schwartz 2003, 2001). These capacities are also impacted by dispositional characteristics (e.g., schemas), environmental characteristics (e.g., relationships, promotional obligations, tour itineraries), and performance demands (what is expected of the performance) (Gardner and Moore 2007) that must also be considered.

An analysis of Shane’s situation through the lens of the HPP can provide important data with which the coaching engagement might work to maximize performance by enhancing each capacity of the HPP and also reducing susceptibility to any negative effects of the dispositional or environmental characteristics or performance demands.

For a touring artist like Shane, with the challenging demands of a crammed touring itinerary, physical capacity is particularly salient. Weeks and months on end are spent traveling, playing shows in one town after another, undertaking promotional commitments such as interviews each

day, and frequently sleeping in a different location each night. In other words, there are countless demands on Shane’s time and energy, and very little time for quality rest and recovery. The coaching engagement might therefore explore how Shane could establish the periods of physical recovery necessary to maximize his performance, which may entail establishing and implementing certain rituals in the lead-up to the Enmore show, as well as throughout future tours. Such rituals may be relevant to Shane only (e.g., no interviews before 10:00 am) or impact the entire band (e.g., a night off before every concert on tour, minimizing travel on show days, staying in hotel rooms rather than on a tour bus, scheduling regular breaks at home among the touring). The latter rituals may be more challenging to implement because they also require the buy-in of the other band members.

Addressing spiritual capacity focuses on acknowledging and exploring personal values and goals in order to fuel autonomous motivation, cultivate a sense of purpose, and inspire the energy, determination, and resilience required to drive peak performance (Loehr and Schwartz 2001). Shane’s fellow band members, as well as the band’s wider team (manager, booking agent, record label, etc.) may provide considerable external motivation to perform well, yet it is autonomous motivation that is key to driving optimal performance (Ryan and Deci 2000; Sheldon and Elliot 1999). The more the process of performing live (and doing so well) is congruent with Shane’s own values, goals, implicit beliefs, and emotions, the more likely he may be to strive for goals related to performance, to attain those goals and perform optimally, and to experience subjective well-being (Ryan and Deci 2001; Sheldon and Elliot 1999; Sheldon and Kasser 1998).

It may therefore be important for the coaching engagement to explore the levels of autonomy and authenticity in Shane’s performance motivations. This could entail discussing Shane’s values and goals with regard to being a performing artist (e.g., the relative and sometimes competing importance of motivations such as commercial success, artistic integrity, artistic self-expression) and with regard to the performance at the Enmore itself, as well as examining his commitment to these values and goals. By clarifying, affirming, and re-committing to these goals and values, Shane’s motivation to perform well may become increasingly integrated, enhancing performance as a potential result (Ryan and Deci 2000).

Shane’s levels of autonomous motivation may also be reflected in the extent to which he completes the tasks established in the coaching engagement.

In terms of emotional capacity, the emotional state that energizes and inspires peak performance is enhanced when positive emotions are nurtured. Close personal relationships

are particularly powerful in restoring and enhancing these positive emotions (Loehr and Schwartz 2001). This promotes the sense of relatedness that constitutes one of three basic psychological needs whose fulfillment is integral to optimal performance (Ryan and Deci 2000). The coaching engagement might explore Shane's support network and the extent to which he experiences relatedness, particularly while on tour. Do his fellow band-members provide this for him? Coaching could explore rituals Shane can implement in the lead-up to this performance and on future tours (e.g., regular contact with particular friends and family, being accompanied by his partner) that might enhance his sense of relatedness, thus contributing to the increased positive emotions necessary for optimal performance. Conversely, regular time to recharge in solitude away from bandmates—or to focus backstage in privacy before shows—may also contribute to an increase in positive emotional states.

Enhancing mental (cognitive) capacity involves the development of certain cognitive skills. In this case, an ability to stabilize attentional focus is critical for Shane's performance in light of past reactions to mistakes, as he will need to remain task-focused rather than obsessing over the mistake and becoming increasingly self-focused. Attentional training, used effectively in the clinical treatment of anxiety disorders (Cavanagh 2003; Wells and Matthews 1994), may be useful in developing the necessary attentional control to avoid such self-focus (Cavanagh 2003), and can also be used as a tool of mindfulness training (Spence 2006). Teaching Shane mindfulness skills may help him simply observe and accept the emotions associated with making a mistake without getting caught up in them and allow him to remain task-focused rather than self-focused. This is an aspect of the coaching engagement that will be discussed in more detail shortly. Developing such improved attentional control may also enhance Shane's sense of competence, another basic psychological need that can affect optimal performance (Ryan and Deci 2000), and bolster his sense of self-efficacy with regard to performing well, even in the wake of mistakes.

The performance demands for the Enmore show—i.e., to entertain the audience—are no different from those of the many other concerts that the band has successfully played to date, and Shane has proved himself perfectly capable of meeting these performance demands. However, the pressure to meet these demands, both from himself and his team (manager, booking agent, record label, etc.) may be greater for this particular show, and Shane's ability to remain task-focused despite mistakes and despite increased pressure from others may be key to success.

Mental rehearsal may be a useful tool in the lead-up to the performance (Aufegger et al. 2016; Braden, Osborne, and Wilson 2015), and by running through the opening song in

his mind, or giving thought to what he is going to say to the audience, Shane may improve performance and reduce the capacity for mistakes, as well as increasing his own level of comfort within the performance phase.

From a cognitive perspective, the coaching engagement might do well to consider any performance schemas that are part of the dispositional characteristics affecting Shane's performance (Gardner and Moore 2007). A case conceptualization of this case study might suggest that performance schemas linking successful concert performance with a lack of mistakes (e.g., "I must not make mistakes, otherwise it will be a poor performance," or "good performers do not make mistakes") are contributing to the negative reaction following a mistake. Such schemas may cause undue focus on playing the right notes, when a good performance actually includes other elements that may be more important.

In fact, it is possibly the negative cognitions and emotional responses experienced by Shane after a mistake, and the self-defeating pattern of (rule-governed) behavior that ensues (Gardner and Moore 2007)—withdrawing and disconnecting from the audience and the band, mumbling the remaining songs, and making more mistakes—that lead to a perception of poor performance among the audience, not the initial mistake itself.

The coaching engagement could address these schemas by considering Shane's beliefs about good performances (e.g., What elements constitute a good performance? Are there shows Shane has either played or watched where mistakes have *not* undermined a good performance, or have even enhanced it by providing an opportunity for greater connection with the audience?).

Coaching could aim to change the maladaptive cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to making a mistake by using a cognitive-behavioral approach (Grant 2001). Such an approach would challenge and dispute the cognitions that follow the trigger event of making a mistake, and replace them with functional beliefs, leading to behaviors that may support optimal performance rather than undermine it.

Performance Phase

However, this cognitive-behavioral approach may actually be counterproductive when applied to the performance phase. Here, Shane must be task-focused in order to perform optimally, not only playing the songs well, but also staying in sync with the rest of his band, engaging, entertaining, and connecting with the audience, and conveying the emotional power of the songs with an energized performance. Attempting to challenge and dispute the unhelpful cognitions that may occur following mistakes—or even whenever the fear arises that a mistake *might* occur—could encourage Shane's attentional faculties to become increasingly self-focused, removing attentional resources from the

task of performing optimally, and potentially jeopardizing the quality of performance.

A more useful approach to the performance phase might therefore be to apply a mindfulness-based approach, whereby self-focus is actually reduced. Gardner and Moore (2007) suggest an approach called Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment (MAC), an approach that is gaining empirical support for its efficacy in enhancing performance, as well as reducing behavioral issues, emotional distress, and psychological symptoms (Gross et al. 2016; Gardner and Moore 2012; Moore 2009). This approach aims to establish and maintain ideal performance states by applying mindful and non-judgmental awareness and acceptance of present thoughts, emotions, and senses, focusing attention on cues relevant to performance, and committing to performance-related values and goals. As a result, Shane's emotional reactivity to mistakes may decrease and the habitual patterns of behavior that precipitate sub-optimal performances can potentially be broken.

This approach necessitates mindfulness training in the pre-performance stage, whereby Shane develops the skills to practice mindfulness in the full flight of performance. Gardner and Moore (2007) propose seven stages to implementing the MAC approach, some of which intersect with other areas of the coaching engagement: preparing the client with psycho-education; introducing mindfulness and cognitive fusion; introducing values and values-driven behavior; introducing acceptance; enhancing commitment; skill consolidation and poise; maintaining and enhancing mindfulness, acceptance, and commitment. Training could entail centering exercises, mindfulness meditation, attentional training, and clarification of goals and values (Gardner and Moore 2007; Spence 2006).

Mindfulness may help Shane remain task-focused in the event of any mistakes and may also help him respond more accurately and appropriately to various cues during performance, thereby enhancing the quality of performance he is able to give (e.g., assessing any changes in sound quality and instructing the sound engineer accordingly, responding appropriately to audience reactions that are sometimes rather unpredictable). With both a clarified sense of what constitutes a quality performance (as discussed in pre-performance), and a mindful approach, Shane's cycle of self-regulation during performance (Grant 2006) may be greatly improved as he is able to monitor the performance situation more effectively and make the necessary adjustments to enhance and maintain a high quality of performance.

The acceptance that mistakes are an inevitable part of performing may help Shane to move on from any mistake he makes. Shane may also accept and integrate the belief that it is the *reaction* to the mistake—withdrawing and dis-

connecting from the audience and the band, mumbling the remaining songs, and making more mistakes—that gives the perception of poor performance, not the initial mistake itself. This may lead to a capacity to reframe the mistake as an opportunity to deepen the bond with the audience by making light of the mistake while interacting with the audience.

Another tactic for helping Shane to retain his task-focus and avoid excessive self-focus during performance might be the use of trigger cues (Moran 2009). Shane checks the tuning of his guitar between most songs. While it is important that Shane's guitar remains in tune throughout the concert, this behavior of tuning between songs has become a ritual developed to mitigate any unease in engaging the audience between songs. This ritual could also be used as a trigger cue for a speedy centering exercise (Gardner and Moore 2007).

Post-performance Phase

The post-performance phase embodies Shane's response to the performance. According to Gardner and Moore (2007), there are three main responses post-performance: sustained active involvement; re-engagement following poor performance; disengagement from the activity.

Shane's career will feature many more live performances, so the aim in the post-performance space will be to support Shane's sustained active involvement in the process of cultivating peak performance states for future concerts and to help him re-engage if he does experience a poor performance.

Ongoing coaching should support Shane as he continues to enhance elements of the HPP between shows and sustain mindfulness training, as well as revisiting values, goals, and motivations. In the wake of a poor performance, it may be necessary to focus on enhancing Shane's sense of competence and self-efficacy. Such self-efficacy contributes to Shane's levels of mental toughness (Clough, Earle, and Sewell 2002). If self-efficacy declines, optimal performance may be compromised (Ryan and Deci 2000), as may be the desire to perform at all (Carver and Scheier 1988).

Finally, it could be a useful ongoing exercise to build an emotional profile for Shane that is associated with his best performances. By collecting data over time concerning Shane's emotional experiences around each performance, and noting the corresponding quality of performance, Shane's Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning (Hanin 1997) can be determined, showing the specific pre-performance emotional states that are most likely to lead to optimal performance. Studies have shown that by using psychological skills training interventions to achieve the necessary emotional state, individuals can enhance performance (e.g., Cohen, Tenenbaum, and English 2006). Once this zone has

been established, therefore, the coaching engagement can establish psychological skills training interventions to help Shane achieve the necessary emotional state before every performance, with the aim of enhancing performance. For example, if Shane performs best when arousal is low, then a series of relaxation exercises performed in the dressing room immediately before a concert might be of benefit.

Conclusion

This case study has explored how a coaching engagement might serve to enhance peak performance in the three interactive phases of performance (pre-performance, performance, post-performance) with regard to an upcoming concert.

This coaching focuses on peak performance from two angles. First, coaching aims to cultivate the cognitive, affective, and physiological states that lead to peak performance while countering the potentially negative effects of dispositional and environmental characteristics and performance demands. Second, coaching aims to address a specific behavioral pattern that has occasionally occurred in the past and threatens to undermine optimal performance, namely the negative cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to making a mistake.

In the first instance, Loehr and Schwartz's (2001) High-Performance Pyramid provides a useful framework in the pre-performance phase for assessing Shane's situation and identifying areas for consideration. In the second instance, a mindful approach to performance, such as Gardner and Moore's (2007) Mindfulness-Acceptance-Commitment approach, aims to counter the negative response to a mistake, and thereby enhance optimal performance.

Finally, coaching in the post-performance phase aims to continue the process of cultivating ideal performance states, as well as focusing on enhancing self-efficacy in the wake of a poor performance. Establishing the emotional states that comprise Shane's Individual Zone of Optimal Functioning (Hanin 1997) may also provide a useful preparation tool for future shows.

Endnotes

1. The names of the artist and band have been changed.

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