

A Performance Review Technique to Strategically Build Confidence (yet Avoid Devolving into a Cocky Bastard)

Description

I grew up in a small town about 30-60 minutes away from the nearest metropolitan area, so most performances were followed by a long, quiet drive home with not much to think about other than the performance that just took place. This wasn't such a drag after the occasional good performance, but it wasn't so pleasant after mediocre to face palm-range performances (which was most of the time).

As it turns out, this post-performance review period is an important time, where we have an opportunity to either build confidence or create more self-doubt.

So what should I have been thinking about on the drive home?

The post-performance review

Studies have found that there are two basic ways of reflecting on our past successes and failures. One way is to simply review the events that transpired in a very dry, concrete, factual sort of way (a.k.a. the "how" approach). So if I had a memory slip in a big performance, I could go back and review all the events leading up to the memory slip, like when I began working on the piece, how I approached the memorization process, what I was thinking about in the moment before the slip happened, etc.

Or, I could take a more abstract approach and consider all the implications and meanings around what happened (a.k.a. the "why" approach). What it *means* that I had a memory slip, and all the associated implications of said snafu ("I suck at memorizing music; that was so embarrassing, I bet my students in the audience think I'm a total hack of a teacher; I should never play from memory; Heck, I don't know if I have any business performing period, there are so many other better players out there; Etc.").

Those are examples of how one might reflect after a failure. You can see how the abstract style could lead to the deterioration of one's self-confidence, motivation, and how one might approach, feel about, and perform in future opportunities. Referred to as "negative overgeneralization," the downsides of putting too much stock in one failure have been demonstrated in other studies (resulting in such things as poor problem-solving, feelings of worthlessness, and difficulty recovering emotionally from setbacks).

Egad. A negative confidence death spiral. So at first glance, it seems like we should avoid "why" reflections as much as possible.

But what about *successful* performances? Is the abstract (“why”) approach still a no-no when reflecting on performances or moments that went well?

Why vs. how

222 athletes from a variety of sports at various levels¹ volunteered to take place in [this study](#).

They were asked to think back to their last competition and rate how well they thought they performed from 1-7 (1=very bad; 7=very good).

One group of athletes were asked to reflect on their performance in a more *abstract* manner – in terms of **why** they performed the way they did. About the meaning and consequences of their performance, and what it says about them as a person, about their future, their abilities, and so on.

(Participants were required to answer each question with between 1 1/2 and 3 lines of full-sentence responses.)

“What did your performance mean to you?”;

“What were the consequences and implications of your performance for you?”;

“How did you think about yourself after your performance?”;

“Why did you feel the way you felt after your performance?”;

“Why did you perform the way you did?”;

“What do you think about your performance? What does this performance say about your capacities?”;

“Was your performance like you had expected? Why was it or why was it not like you expected?”

The other group of athletes was instructed to reflect on their performance as well, but in a much more *concrete* way, where they were told to focus on the **what** of their performance. In other words, recreating how the event played out, like watching a video replay of the performance in their mind. Their reflection questions were as follows:

“Play out the performance in your mind. What could you see around you? What did you see?”;

“Play out the performance in your mind. What could you smell? Was the air fresh? Was it cold/warm?”;

“Play out the performance in your mind. What could you hear?”;

“Play out the performance in your mind. Which feelings occurred during your performance?”;

“Play out the performance in your mind. What were the physical sensations you felt during your performance?”;

“Play out the performance in your mind. What did you do right before the game/race?”;

“Play out the performance in your mind. What did you do after the race/game or the rest of the day?”

Predicting the future

Then they were asked to make a prediction about their future performances. Specifically, how likely they

thought it was that they would perform this well again, from 0 (“I will certainly NOT perform like this”) to 100 (“I will definitely perform like this”).

They gave estimations for a range of performance situations – from their next training session to their next competitive event to the next month, season, and even their career.

Owning it

As predicted, the individuals who reflected on their performance in the abstract method, were more optimistic about their future performances and had higher expectations of success in the future. The concrete reflectors were less optimistic about their future and the possibility of success.

Furthermore, the abstract reflectors were more likely to generalize their success into their core sense of self. In other words, taking their successful performance and “owning” it or integrating it more deeply into their identity (think [mini core memories ala Disney's Inside Out](#)).

Caveat #1: Self-esteem

As usual, there are a couple caveats with this confidence-building strategy. The effectiveness of this post-performance reflection approach depends somewhat on one’s self-esteem. For those with normal to high levels of self-esteem, the abstract processing style seems to help you be more confident about your ability to achieve success in the future.

But for those with low self-esteem, it’s not quite so clear. Because for an individual low in self-esteem, it’s possible that their response to a question like “What does this performance say about your capacities?” could also spark a downward spiral of self-doubt like “I was probably just lucky. I know I’m going to screw up again like I always do next time. I don’t feel like I deserved this win; it was just a fluke.”

Caveat #2: Professional vs. amateur

The second caveat is that in this particular study, there were very few professional or collegiate athletes involved. The majority were recreational or amateur athletes. Since a professional’s identity would presumably be a little more wrapped up in their sport performance (even though one could argue that [it needn't nor should it be](#)) it’s not guaranteed that everything would be the same for elite performers.

Take action

So it seems like we have a choice after each performance. We can review our performance in a manner that helps us *build* confidence, or in a way that makes us question ourselves and feels pretty rotten. I suppose one could argue that there might be a time and place where the latter could be a helpful thing, but in general it seems like the more optimal formula looks like this:

After better performances: Reflect on the “why’s” of your last performance to help you build confidence in your abilities and generalize your success to future performances (assuming your self-esteem helps you take this in a positive direction).

After poorer performances: Engage in more of a play-by-play to see what you could do differently next time. Avoid trying to make meaning of what happened, and trying to figure out what it says about you and your future.

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