



Resilience, Mental Toughness

The key to developing performance, well-being and positive behaviour in individuals. A leadership challenge & opportunity.

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Leadership and Mental Toughness – the background

Our understanding of Leadership has changed little since people first began to examine it. We've always understood that leadership is that quality which enables one person to motivate another to give their discretionary effort. Not just what they have contractually agreed to give but to give their all - to be the best that they can be. That's true whether we are talking about students or staff. Effective leadership leads to better performance, much better morale and well-being and a positive culture.

For the past sixty years we've also known that effective leadership is a result of a clear and focused determination to deliver; an engagement with individuals assuring them of the leader's interest and support and an engagement with team working. Followers respond positively to this leadership.

Is there anything special about leadership in the 21st century? Well leadership hasn't changed but the context has. We live in interesting times. Change of all types is happening all around us and is accelerating exponentially.

The people we educate and develop and who now are being prepared for life and for work have also evolved into people who are very different to what they were only 25 years ago. This is equally true of people within work.

We can also quickly list the main forms of change that impact on all of us: globalisation; a genuine acceptance of diversity; an understanding of our true place in the world order - particularly economically, etc.

Developing people has always been challenging, fulfilling, pressured and full of stressors. Today it is arguably harder and hence more stressful than ever before - and will be more so into the future. This is where mental toughness matters.

Mental toughness has always been important. It's always been a significant factor in individual and organisational performance, well-being and creating a positive atmosphere. As the world becomes more challenging, we either try to ignore it or we can do what the mentally tough do and welcome change as a source of opportunity to grow and to develop.

What is Mental Toughness? – an overview

First we need to tackle what mental toughness is not. It is not about being tough in the machismo sense of the word. It is about being tough in the resilience and confidence senses of the word.

Mental toughness is perhaps best understood as a mindset in a similar way to the way Carol Dweck describes mindset. It describes the

default response we all make when faced with stressors, pressures or challenges. This impacts significantly on our performance, our well-being and the extent to which we adopt a positive approach to do what we have to in order to get on in life.

Professor Clough uses a phrase which graphically captures the essence of mental toughness. He describes a mentally tough person "as someone who is comfortable in their own skin". This generally means that they can take what comes in their stride. As he points out, there is no need for someone in this state to be aggressive or domineering or difficult.

Importantly we now understand mental toughness to be a narrow plastic personality trait. It exists in all of us to some extent and comes into play every time we have to do something – at work, at play, at study, etc. Plasticity means that it can change and evolve over time – and we can often shape that

| The Evidence

There is now a significant volume of independent evidence emerging which supports and builds upon our mental toughness model.

This research, and the plethora of ongoing national and international studies, has shown that mental toughness brings both performance advantages under pressure, and more importantly, allows people at all levels to fulfil their potential.

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The studies range from qualitative studies of coping mechanisms through to work at the Universities of Parma and Modena & Reggio using MRI brain scans has identified where mental toughness exists in the brain. We are working hard to provide biological, environmental and psychology explanation for existence of, and benefits accrued from, mental toughness.

Mentally tough people appear to prosper in challenging conditions in sport, education, employment, society, etc. .

The mentally tough achieve an advantage by using a series of active coping mechanisms and having the ability to control their thinking processes. Peter's work and research at the University of Western Ontario is showing that this 'mental advantage' is a complex mix of positive thinking, enhanced cognitive processing skills and lifestyle components, brought together by the confluence of genetics and environmental factors. Its nature and nurture.

This mental advantage allows athletes, senior managers, professionals such as teachers, undergraduates and students to maximise their opportunities for growth whilst minimising any threats,.

Research at the University of Basel shows clearly that the mentally tough often have less depression and anxiety, sleep better and

generally report higher levels of wellbeing. It is a virtuous narrow personality trait.

What about the mentally sensitive?

The model also provides a road map for helping them to navigate through life and work.

It seems there are options here. We can either aspire to be more mentally tough or we can learn to do what the mentally tough when dealing with stressors. Both seem to work.

Key psychological and cognitive skills can allow the less tough to operate in an often difficult world, allowing them to bring to the table much needed diversity and a radically different approach to problem solving.

What is Mental Toughness? – a closer look

Our work with Peter has shown that Mental Toughness consists of 4 factors, which in turn can be sub divided. . This enables leaders of all types to dig deep into understanding the mindset of their charges.

Even more usefully, together with AQR, Peter has developed a valid and reliable psychometric measure, which supports these same people in their analyses and diagnoses. The four factors are called the 4Cs.

The first is **Control**. This describes the extent to which a person feels in control of their lives and their circumstances and the extent to which they can control the display of their emotions. Life Control is where the sense of "can do" sits.

Emotional control describes the extent to which the individual can manage their own mood and the mood of others.

The second factor is **Commitment**. This is about goal orientation.

This describes the extent to which someone is prepare to make promises which are measurable (goals) and, once made, to what extent they will do what it takes to deliver them. Those promises can be made to oneself or to others.

Control and Commitment taken together are what most mean by resilience. But resilience is largely a passive quality and is only a part of mental toughness.

Challenge is the third factor. This introduces a positive component to the model and links it strongly to positive psychology. This describes the extent to which the individual will push back boundaries, accept risk and stretch themselves - and how they see all outcomes. They will see learning and opportunity even in failure and setback.

Finally, **Confidence** completes the picture. This describes the extent to which people believe in themselves - have confidence in

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'Mental advantage' is a complex mix of positive thinking, enhanced cognitive processing skills and lifestyle components

"Mental Toughness consists of 4 factors (Control, Commitment, Challenge , Confidence)"

their abilities - and whether they possess the interpersonal confidence to influence others and deal with their challenges.

This component adds a further proactive component.

It's not difficult to see how mental Toughness applies to all of us.

I Applications

Our work, and the work of partners and associates, take us into the world of work where it is used in leadership development and almost every aspect of staff and student development.

In Education it is used to manage transition, help students perform better, improve retention and develop employability. In social work it is used to support employability programmes as well as developing those who are disadvantaged in some ways. In health we see evidence that mind-set can impact on the success of treatments and medication.

An illustration of the application in secondary education, is a project carried out in the UK in Knowsley in the North of England. The Director of Education wanted to explore the link between Mental Toughness and attainment, behaviour and career aspirations.

He arranged for all students in Year 10 (240 in total) to be assessed for Mental Toughness and for data to be provided about their performance on ability tests, their behaviour in class, their career aspirations and, interestingly, the extent to which they reported bullying.

The results were very interesting and very revealing.

The relationship with attainment on tests

Analysis showed that in examining verbal, non-verbal ability and quantitative abilities, there was a direct correlation between Mental Toughness and the measure of ability. The following year this was replicated almost exactly in a similar study in Holland.

This reflects what many know about people (of all ages) with ability. They don't always show that when under pressure (e.g. in an exam). A big part of the explanation lies in their mental toughness – their mind-set.

The relationship with (positive) behaviour

The model measures explained that 13% and 25% of variance in negative behaviour for males and females respectively - a significantly better predictor of behaviour than teachers assessments. This is not a criticism of teachers. The

same thing emerges in the workplace where managers make better selection and development decisions about staff if they use psychometrics than if they use only their judgement.

The relationship with Career Aspiration

This was a core objective for the study. The analysis showed that the more mentally tough the student, the higher the aspirations.

This may have particular significance for the development of Emiratisation.

The relationship with Bullying

The study showed that there was a clear and strong relationship between students belief they were being bullied in some way and their level of mental toughness. This confirms the finding of a major work place study on the same theme.

The likely explanation is that mentally tough people shrug off other people's behaviour or actions and don't feel bullied or threatened by it.

In recent years attention has moved to examine can you develop mental toughness and achieve benefit from doing so ... and is it sustainable?

The short answer is that you can and that many of the techniques for doing this are well known to teachers, trainers and coaches.

These revolve around six themes:

1. Positive Thinking – learning the power of being positive
2. Anxiety Control – learning how to deal with panic and fear
3. Visualisation – learning how to use the mind
4. Goal Setting – widely taught but rarely practised
5. Attentional Control – learning to focus better

Developing mental toughness does require self awareness a desire to do something about it.

Curiously, there is even scope for developing the mentally tough. High levels of mental toughness, can, where there is poor self-awareness, also manifest itself in potential downsides such as over committing yourself and others.

Nevertheless, it remains true that generally the mentally tough appear to achieve more than the mentally sensitive and enjoy a greater degree of contentment.

Coming back to leadership, mental toughness emerges as a personality based competence which underpins the core leadership competences when challenge and change become the dominant themes in our working environment.

We will often say that if our Mental Toughness had a core purpose it was all about being the best that we can be. For school leaders it is about showing everyone, staff and students, how they can be the best that they can be. It's difficult to show others how to learn this without understanding it and demonstrating it to others.