



Developing resilience in elite sport: the role of the environment

Dr Mustafa Sarkar discusses the role of the environment in developing resilience in light of recent cultural and athlete welfare issues in elite sport.

In recent years, there has been an increased scrutiny over the “winning at all costs” culture of Olympic, Paralympic and professional sports with particular concerns over athlete welfare. This has led to the publication of an independent report by Baroness Grey-Thompson in to the issues surrounding the Duty of Care that sports have towards their participants. Interestingly, in the section on mental welfare, the report states that, “The routine element of elite sport, where the regime is one of continuous training, performance, and selection, brings significant mental resilience challenges for both participants and coaches” (p.22), and for those on a high performance pathway, “Mental resilience is not something that all participants and coaches automatically have and this should be developed with the same consideration that physical resilience is built” (p. 23). Building on this observation and recommendation, in this article, I discuss an evidence-based resilience training programme that has started to be used in elite sport to develop resilience, with a particular focus on the role of the environment.

Evidence-based resilience training

Put simply, mental resilience refers to the ability to use personal qualities to withstand pressure (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Over the last couple of years, there has been a burgeoning interest in evidence-based programmes and interventions to develop resilience in the workplace for both performance and well-being (for reviews see Robertson *et al.*, 2015; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2017). One such approach that has started to be used in elite sport is a programme of mental fortitude training (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Underpinned by resilience-related theory and research, the mental fortitude training programme focuses on three main areas (personal qualities, facilitative environment and challenge mindset) to enhance performers’ ability to withstand pressure (see Figure 1). Importantly, in the context of the present discussion, rather than being considered as a fixed trait, resilience is viewed as a capacity that can be developed (over time) in the context of person-environment interactions.

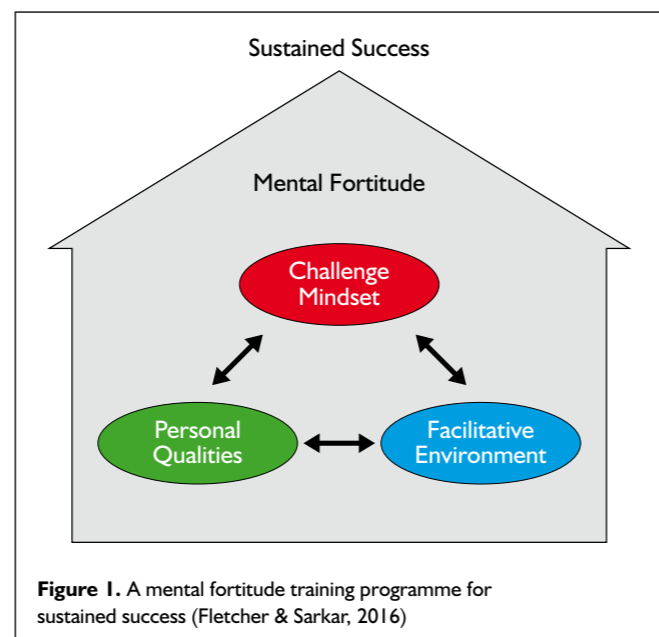


Figure 1. A mental fortitude training programme for sustained success (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016)

Resilience and the environment: challenge and support

Although it is tempting to focus on individuals’ ability to withstand pressure, in light of the aforementioned cultural issues and concerns of elite sport, more attention needs to be paid to creating environments that people can thrive in as both a person and a performer. Of fundamental importance to developing high performance environments are the notions of challenge and support. Challenge involves having high expectations of people, and helps to instil accountability and responsibility. Support refers to enabling people to develop their personal qualities, and helps to promote learning and build trust. Based on the notions of challenge and support, the environment that leaders and coaches create can be differentiated between four categories: low-challenge-

low-support; high challenge-low support; low challenge-high support; and high challenge-high support. In the mental fortitude training programme, these quadrants are labelled as stagnant environment, unrelenting environment, comfortable environment, and facilitative environment respectively (see Figure 2). Each environment is characterised by different features, but for resilience to be developed for sustained success and well-being, a facilitative environment needs to be created and maintained.

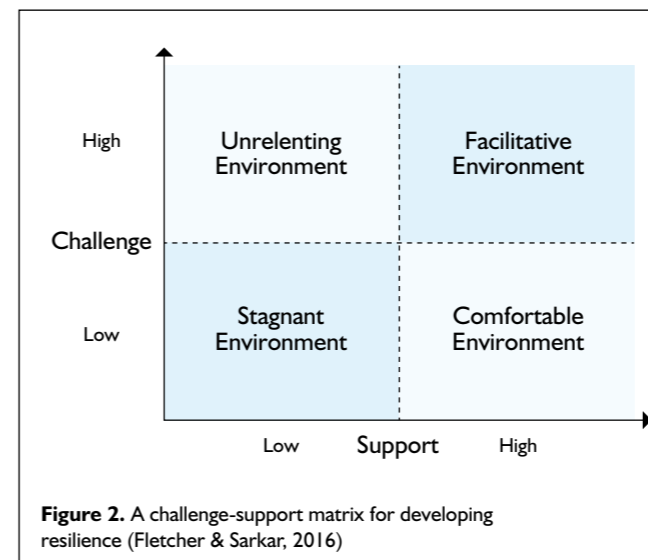


Figure 2. A challenge-support matrix for developing resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016)

Unrelenting environment versus facilitative environment

In the context of the present discussion, it is important to differentiate between the features of an unrelenting environment and a facilitative environment. If too much challenge and not enough support is imposed then the unrelenting environment will compromise well-being. The unrelenting environment is characterised by unhealthy competition, leaders exposing and ridiculing under performers, a blame culture when high standards are not met, an avoidance mentality due to the consequences of making mistakes, little care for well-being, people feeling isolated, potential conflict, unsustainable performance, potential burnout, and a “sink or swim” attitude (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016).

These features are consistent with some of the athlete welfare issues and concerns that have been raised and investigated in recent years in some British sports. Conversely, if too much support and not enough challenge is provided then the comfortable environment will not enhance performance. To facilitate both excellence and welfare in elite sport, the environment must balance high levels of challenge and support. This facilitative environment is characterised by supportive challenge towards a goal, individuals having input into and taking ownership of goals, individuals seeking out challenges to develop, individuals craving constructive feedback, good relationships between performers and leaders or coaches, a psychologically safe environment that encourages sensible risk-taking, healthy competition, everyone supporting one another, learning from mistakes and failures, recognition and celebration of success, and a “we’re in this together” attitude (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016). Importantly, these features of a facilitative environment should be developed with and through the main decision-makers (e.g. performance directors) and key personnel (e.g. coaches) whose views will likely influence potential intervention (cf. Sarkar & Fletcher, 2016).

The need for reflection on culture

In light of the different features and contrasting outcomes of an unrelenting environment and a facilitative environment, it is vital for sport organisations to reflect on their existing culture. To aid this reflection, a number of possible questions could be asked and addressed: Can individuals have open and honest discussions about their resilience? Is there a challenge culture where individuals view

pressure as an opportunity to perform, or a threatening culture where pressure evokes a fear of failure? Is developing resilience seen as a bureaucratic “tick-box” exercise or a genuine initiative for sustained positive change?

In relation to this latter question, it is important to note that the effectiveness of resilience training depends on the breadth and depth of commitment from *all* layers of and personnel within an organisation (e.g. the executive board, managerial committees, technical and support staff, coaches, athletes and parents). Indeed, this was the attitude taken by the U.S. Army who developed the Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) programme, an effective strategic initiative to develop resilience in soldiers, family members and Army civilians. The programme received total and unequivocal commitment from the top of the organisation and full support from Department of Defence leaders, members of Congress and a budget to match. Thus, in effect, the best way to ensure long-lasting transformation is to make it a critical part of a culture change strategy over a period of time. Indeed, General Casey (the person responsible for implementing CSF) stated that, “Like our physical fitness, I believe that psychological resilience development can become not just something we in the Army ‘do’, but rather a critical component of our culture that will be integrated throughout our community to develop better soldiers.” (Casey, 2011, p. 2)

Final thoughts

In ending, it is worth emphasising that developing resilience in elite sport, particularly creating and maintaining a facilitative environment, requires a multi-level approach (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2016; Wagstaff *et al.*, 2017). Leadership, management, coaching, support staff and parents all have important roles in creating and role-modelling the desired culture, through appropriate motivational and developmental feedback. As a further illustration, the organisation’s vision should inspire those within it to establish a collective identity that embodies cultural and behavioural norms of reacting positively and appropriately to pressure. Indeed, a multi-level approach is demonstrated best when individual resilience is supported by resilient organisations that, in turn, are underpinned by effective public policies (cf. Wagstaff *et al.*, 2017). Although changing policies and organisational practices is much more challenging than working at the individual level in terms of developing resilience, it is a vital step for practitioners if we, as a discipline, are to improve and maintain the success and well-being of British sport performers at the highest level. ■



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