NEW HAMPSHIRE (NHAHPERD) STATE CONFERENCE

Waterville Valley, NH; 11.16.23
Keynote Address: James Davis, EdM, MA

Leading Toward a Healthier Future through Bedrock Education

James Davis, EdM, MA

Hi everyone. Thanks for being here today. This a special group and I am absolutely honored by the invitation. Thank you to Dianne Rappa – Executive Director, pioneer of health, the pride of Plymouth State, and friend to all. I'm grateful for your continued support.

Every time I'm out this way I am inspired by three things. First, the beauty of the landscape on the commute in – if I lived out here, I'm not sure I could get any work done. I'd be too busy bouncing through these mountains, looking for bears or staring off into the birches.

Once I arrive, I am inspired by the vibe of this community – the welcoming nature, the instinct to learn and share, the variety of backgrounds, and the common purpose to promote health and wellbeing. The combination of professors, administrators, and boots-on-the ground educators within your organization makes it a powerful one. I will save the third inspiration for just a moment.

Introduction to Bedrock Education

I am here today to discuss a few concepts that we put in the category of "Bedrock Education"; that is, concepts so essential, so foundational, that they are not niceties, but necessities in our lives. As educators, our task is to bring that essential understanding to those in our charge. To empower people through health. To change and improve lives. That's no small task.

I should also provide a disclaimer: I am not a physical education teacher. I do not have the credentials or, frankly, the right job. But I am an unflinching ally of the work that you all are doing, the work that is possible in the realm of health and physical education. The disclaimer is intended to enhance that point… I am not an advocate because my job depends on it. There are no ulterior motives. I am an advocate because your work is essential. Without it, society crumbles. A big statement, I know. I'll make a few of those today.

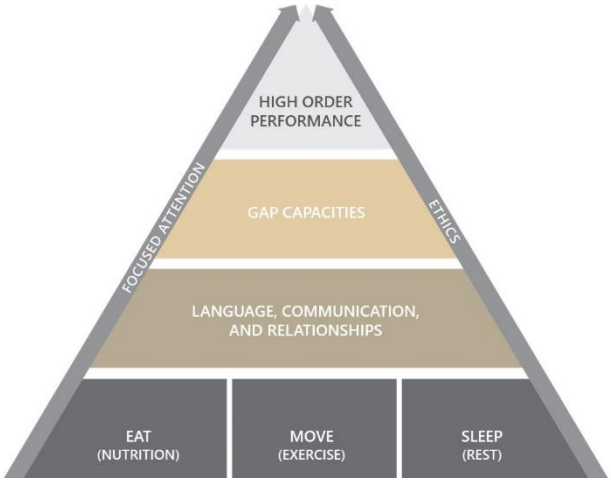
My area of study is human development and psychology. I earned a degree with that title from Harvard University and the concepts have influenced every area of my life. I've studied long and hard, written many papers, presented at conferences, and consulted around the world with everyone from high school athletes to Olympians to C-suite executives responsible for $100 million portfolios. I am so fortunate to have witnessed the peak of human performance in a variety of realms. It's humbling. All these high performers share one thing in common: they are embodied. They move through their experience in human vessels, subject to any biological truths of which we are aware.

What an obvious thing to say. That our experience begins in the body.

So I will ask, in the words of David Foster Wallace, from his famous speech at Kenyon College, for us all to "bracket for just a few minutes [any] skepticism about the value of the totally obvious," (Wallace, 2005).

The High Order Performance Framework

The term Bedrock refers to the High Order Performance framework (Davis, 2023). Picture it as a compass, a reliable tool to navigate the complexities of self-improvement and goal attainment. In the spirit of iconic models like Maslow's hierarchy of needs, our framework is presented in layers—each one building upon the other in a state of continuous, indistinguishable interaction.



Understanding should precede problem-solving. It is the only place to start. Use this tool to self-check, to build a more comprehensive understanding. At the top of the framework is the High Order Performance level. This is where the user is asked to articulate a goal and envision what their own performance would have to look like to achieve it. HOP takes its name from, among other concepts, Bloom's Taxonomy. Bloom created a system of classification beginning with "lower order" skills like knowledge retention, comprehension, and application. The skills increased in complexity toward "higher order" skills like analysis, synthesis, evaluation and eventually, creation (Adams, 2015; Bloom, 1956). Arthur Lewis and David Smith suggest that higher order thinking occurs "when a person takes new information and information stored in memory and interrelates and/or rearranges and extends this information to achieve a purpose or find possible answers in perplexing situations" (Lewis & Smith, 1993, p. 136). To engage in complex problem solving, creativity, and innovation, higher-order thinking is necessary (Anderson et al., 2001). It is an essential ability in an increasingly complex world.

The GAP level highlights skills that help bridge the gap between lower-order processes (remembering, understanding, and certain degrees of application) to successful high order processes like analysis, synthesis, and creation. The advancement does not happen automatically. In order to bridge the gap, utilizing skills such as resilience, toughness, and grit can prove advantageous. The entire field of social emotional learning (SEL) fits into this level, and we

continue to prioritize skills like emotion regulation (De Neve et al., 2023), deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2007), and practical empathy (Davis, 2022).

We work then into the LCR level, which stands for Language, Communication, and Relationships. Drawing inspiration from luminaries like Alan Watts and Antonio Damasio, this level unravels the subtleties of our surroundings, including the role of naming and perspective in our lives, and the ever-important role of 'the way we relate' to our environment. Thoughtful language, precise communication, and meaningful relationships create a scaffolding which supports our experience. The way we converse with ourselves, how we articulate ideas to others, and the connections we cultivate, all contribute to shaping the environment in which we perform. Is it a bummer that it is raining outside? Or is this the perfect day to read a book while the garden gets a free watering?

Skills across the framework depend on skills at the LCR level. Growth Mindset, for example, made famous by Stanford professor Carol Dweck, is an effective tool for long-term success (Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Growth mindset depends on the way one names an obstacle and frames their approach to navigating the challenge. This requires a deliberate cultivation of self-talk and, often, effective communication with other stakeholders (LCR functions). When a leader tells her team that the standardized test they are about to take is impossible, and publicly demeans the organization that has put them in such a disadvantageous position, that will impact mindsets and subsequent behaviors. Test scores will suffer. Conversely, if the language that leader used were positive, they would have the power to induce effective nonconscious predispositions that directly align with a shared goal, since they have created "mental representations... associated with positive affect," (Custers & Aarts, 2005).

When we put all the pieces in place, align them with our objective, and have the humility to reevaluate and adjust as needed, we stand a chance at reaching peak performance. It is all tied together.

Forget whatever you have heard about the mind-body connection. In that discussion, we need to go back even farther. We need to eliminate the mind-body separation – they are not separate entities. They are components of the same system. We separate them to study and understand the pieces, but they are the same. An apple has skin and sugar and water and nutrients… but it is an apple. It is one thing. So are we. This is the beginning of Bedrock understanding.

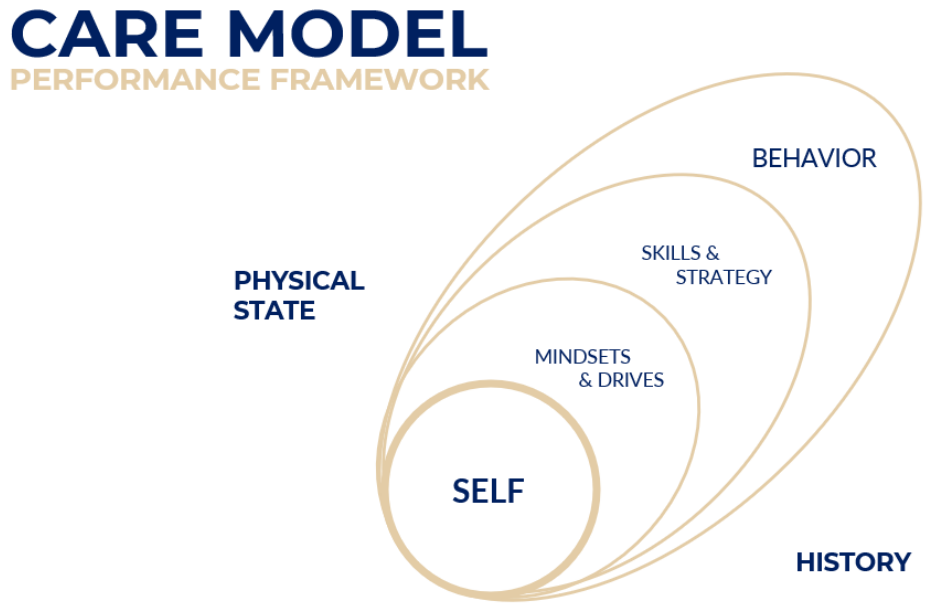
Take Sleep for example. Sleep deprivation, or what some researchers refer to as prolonged wakefulness, directly impacts "attentional functions, working memory, and long-term memory," (Alhola & Polo-Kantola, 2007). It has strong correlations with mood and might not come as a surprise to hear that sleep deprivation seems to nearly double the negative mental health outcomes in students (Davis, 202); after all, that sleep-deprived person "is a system with a fixed amount of available energy," (Sisney, p.29). When the energy drains, so does our ability to navigate challenges and create a healthy existence. The power of healthy sleep cannot be overstated. Consider that it is the only component of the framework which will take care of itself. You must actively pursue your nutrition and most motor movement is voluntary, but given enough time, you will just *fall* to sleep. It is that essential.

There is a growing body of research in psychophysiology, which studies the interrelationship between body and mind (Schell & Dawson, 2001). While the research behind this concept is still evolving, an aware leader should be able to recognize that a malnourished, sedentary, sleep-deprived human does not stand its best chance to fulfill its potential. Effective leaders will take note of the body's role in all other processes. As leadership expert Dr. Alan Watkins explains, "internal physiological awareness... facilitates emotional coherence," and notes that the "body is always playing a tune... problems occur when we're deaf to the tune we are playing," (Watkins, 2013, pg. 12). Let's tune in to the Bedrock level, and all pieces of this framework. It is an essential place to start.

Once we have thorough understanding of the High Order Performance framework and its Bedrock concepts, we can move on to the CARE Model.

The CARE Model

The CARE Model is a tool for building personal, relational, and cultural understanding. It allows us to evaluate the human condition, interactions, and the systems we operate within. Bolstered by growing research from the realms of psychology and psychotherapy – namely Gabor Mate, Richard Schwartz, and Bessel van der Kolk – we have found it to be incredibly helpful in unbraiding complex problems. The human condition is unendingly complex. Our problems are as well. We have a more accurate map of unseeable reaches of the universe than we do of the human mind. This complexity should lead to humility, to thoughtfulness and deliberation. Especially since once we put two of those minds together, or many within a family system or a society, things can feel overwhelming. The CARE Model gives us a set of anchor concepts to create individualized, context-specific, and (most importantly) usable approaches to the incorporation of available information.



Although the Behavior level is the easiest to observe, and the level at which we judge ourselves and others, the CARE Model begins with a more fundamental agreement (influenced by many things, most notably the revelations of Dr. Richard Schwartz) that the Self is intrinsically valuable (Schwartz, 2023). This part is nonnegotiable. It should be cherished and protected. Everyone in this room… matters. You are valuable. You matter on this earth. Not just your experience, but you, on a fundamental level. The challenge with the idea includes the fact that self-concept, self-awareness, our cognitive processes including the way we think and feel about ourselves, exists at the Mindset level. While the Self is valuable, the way we think about it sits just beyond. It can be a challenge to reconcile this dilemma, more challenging to return to it when the word does not provide feedback that reinforces our inherent value; but true, nonetheless.

At the Mindset level we find conscious awareness, core schema, subconscious dispositions, and innate drives like the desire to seek care from caregivers and avoid harm. Those mindsets influence Skills and Strategies which develop to serve those instincts. If one is afraid of dogs and a golden retriever walks into the room, their strategy might be to avoid, to move to the corner of the room and escape perceived danger.

Why would one have a great fear of dogs? Perhaps they were bitten by the neighbor's golden retriever as a child. History matters. Everything we experience makes an impact. The experience and its outcomes are encoded in the nervous system, which predispose mindsets and co-influence drives (van der Kolk, 2014; Mate 2022).

Skills and Strategies evolve alongside experience-informed mindsets, and we behave in a unique way, even in the presence of a shared objective situation. If a retriever gamboled into the room right now, some of us would move to pet it, some would create distance – each of us utilizing Skills and Strategies that align with our Mindsets and demonstrate as Behaviors. Our behavior is an eruption of the organism's wholistic experience.

In keeping with the Bedrock level of the HOP Framework, the entire system is also influenced by physical state. When we are malnourished, sedentary, and sleep-deprived, our behaviors change, our skills are dulled, and mindsets shift (as indicated by the relationship between sleep and mental health) – the entire organism is altered.

It can be a lot of work to take a thoughtful approach like this, to investigate your own experience and reflect on his it relates to others'. You can't do this for everyone you meet. You will have to CARE enough to do so – and when you do, it will be worth it.

For more on the CARE Model, join us tomorrow for an in-depth look at all levels, and how to use the model in coaching and personal worked.

Moving Forward

People, institutions, do not have to take all of this into account. And they often don't. We prioritize convenience and the unfortunate norms of modern life, wrap them in the generous title of 'efficiency' and unintentionally degrade the experience – the existence – of those we would like to see succeed. Schools with early start times and schedules that run counter to adolescent circadian

rhythms, where we teach people to sit and comply for hours on end, snacking from vending machines full of the exact fuel that drives a multibillion-dollar obesity epidemic. We teach social emotional learning skills like emotion regulation, empathy, and resilience in environments which require those skills just to get through. We create well-intentioned mental health initiatives to alleviate the symptoms we have, in many cases, created.

No amount of positive self-talk, not even the cutest support animal, can overcome the deleterious effects of sleep deprivation as it relates to mental health. We should teach people to own and navigate their self-talk. And I wish there were a golden retriever here right now. Let's keep offering support. But layering surface-level interventions on top of a chronically degraded physical state is like icing a cake that is not fully baked.

Slow down. Reevaluate. Address the Bedrock components that are essential to our health and performance. Start there, please.

Leaders. You can do what is easy, what has been normalized, what we are used to. Many do. In that same speech, Wallace reminds us that the "alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing."

Which brings me to my third feeling of inspiration. We have all felt stuck in a default setting at one point or other. Gabor Mate's recent book The Myth of Normal says it all, much of it in the title. What we have come to accept as normal, which it to say, what has been normalized in our society, is anything but. I'm inspired by the fact that this group is different. More ambitious. Better. This group sees the missteps, often well-intentioned or simply misguided, and makes decisions to get us back on the right path. There are more than one hundred influential educators and leaders in this room, hundreds more at the conference. I am inspired by the ethical charge you all have taken on, in the context of this understanding, to improve health, wellness, and countless additional outcomes in the lives of those you educate. Think of that potential. Every year a teacher might have 30-130 students in their charge. Each one of them will go on to influence their communities, many will start families or lead businesses, the chosen few will go on to become educators themselves. Think of the ripple effect of that influence.

The impact you make on those in your building will impact countless more. That impact ripples out. A generation from now, the new normal will be influenced directly, not purely in theory, by you – by your teaching. You are, in no small way, the designers of a healthier future. And you're up to the challenge. Don't let the opportunity to change the world slip away.

The next time we are all together, maybe here at this same conference next year, when presented with the question, 'does your behavior match our goal?', let's be sure we can unanimously say 'yes'. Be extraordinary. Personally, organizationally, and beyond.

Join us tomorrow for more strategies and to dig in on the CARE model. Until then, thank you.

Resources

Adams, N.E. (2015). Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning objectives. J Med Libr Assoc. 103(3):152-3.

Anderson, L. W., Krathwohl, D.R., Airasian, P.W., Cruikshank, K.A., Mayer, R.E., Pintrich, P.R., Wittrock, M.C (2001). *A taxonomy of learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives.* New York, NY: Longman.

Bloom, B.S. (1956). Taxonomy of educational objectives: the classification of educational goals. Longmans, Green; New York, NY.

Bronstein, M.V., Leroy, A., Truyts, A., Everaert, J. (2023). Emotion Regulation in the Classroom: A Network Approach to Model Relations among Emotion Regulation Difficulties, Engagement to Learn, and Relationships with Peers and Teachers. J Youth Adolesc.52(2):273-286.

Custer & Aarts, H. (2005). Positive Affect as Implicit Motivator: On the Nonconscious Operation of Behavioral Goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 89*(2), 129–142.

Damasio, A.R. Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain. New York: G.P. Putnam, 1994.

Davis, J.D. (2023). Using the High Order Performance Framework for Effective Leadership. *Journal of Character and Leadership Development*, 10(3), 77-84.

Davis, J.D. (2022). Practical Empathy. *Teacher Leadership Magazine* (Northwestern University School of Education and Social Policy).

Davis, J.D. (2021). Sleep and Mental Health in Students. *Harvard Public Health Review*.

Dweck C. S., Leggett E. L. (1988). A social-cognitive approach to motivation and personality. *Psychological Review*, 95, 256–273.

Ericsson, K. A. (2007). Deliberate practice and the modifiability of body and mind: Toward a science of the structure and acquisition of expert and elite performance. *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 38(1), 4–34.

Lewis, A. and Smith, D. (1993). Teaching for Higher Order Thinking. *Theory into Practice* 32 (3), 131-137.

Maté, G., & Maté, D. (2022). *The myth of normal: trauma, illness & healing in a toxic culture.* New York, Avery, an imprint of Penguin Random House.

Schell, A., & Dawson, M.E. (2001). Psychophysiology (p. 12448–12452). International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences

Schwartz, R.C. (2023). *Introduction to the internal family systems model*. Louisville, CO: Sounds True. (Original work published 2001).

van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma.* Viking.

Wallace, D. F. (2009). This is water. Little, Brown & Company.