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Chapter 12

Wellness: The Bedrock of Leadership and High-Performance

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“Sports teach life lessons” is a regular suggestion in the athletics realm. That is simply not true. Sports do not teach life lessons... you do, coach. Sports, complemented by unique and powerful opportunities in the weight room, have incredible potential as a learning environment, but the learning does not happen automatically.

Character can be taught through athletics. So can leadership, performance psychology, and communication skills. Picking up a barbell does not accomplish these outcomes, but educators routinely use a barbell to teach them. It must be done intentionally.

All who are inspired to teach life lessons should consider that these skills are heavily influenced by physical wellness. This understanding can be put into the category of ‘Bedrock Education’; that is, concepts so essential, so foundational, that they are not niceties, but necessities in our lives. Educators are tasked to bring that essential understanding to those in their charge. To empower people through health. To change and improve lives. That’s no small task.

High performers from high school athletes to Olympians to C-suite executives responsible for multi-million-dollar portfolios 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.

What should also be obvious is that many systems have been normalized counter to that understanding. We have an opportunity to correct that. We must prioritize the bedrock elements of health. Wellness – both physical and mental – is the foundation of high performance.

The High Order Performance Framework

The High Order Performance Framework can be an effective guide for this work (Davis, 2023). It can serve 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.

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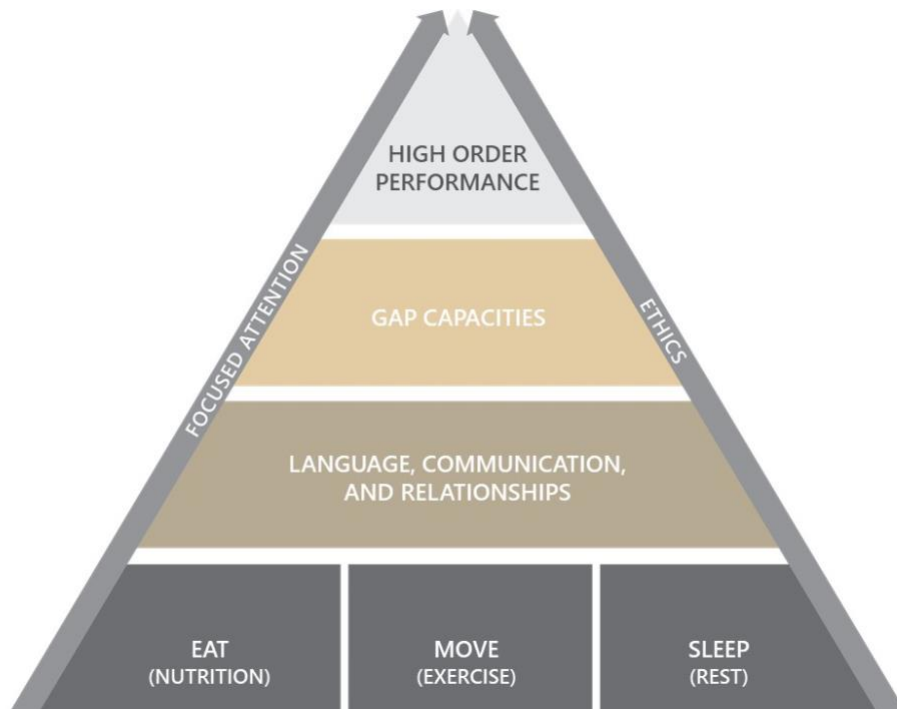


Figure One: High Order Performance (HOP) Framework

Understanding should precede problem-solving. Effective leadership requires an understanding of one's team as a system. Leadership expert Lex Sisney defines human systems as "a series of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements forming a complex whole," (Sisney, 2012, p. 26). He goes on to note that this applies to individual physical systems as well, which are comprised of biological processes, emotions, relationships, and other factors. Understanding how the individual system operates can provide leaders with greater insight into that individual's impact on the group. If one member of a team is being rude and impatient, rubbing others the wrong way and unnecessarily barking at subordinates, then the group might falter. That behavior must go. But understanding that the person is running on two hours of sleep, or that the person has just lost a loved one back home, gives the leader insight into effective and sustainable behavioral management. After all, that sleep-deprived person "is a system with a fixed amount of available energy," (Sisney, p.29). When energy is depleted, skills falter. A full understanding of HOP Framework components provides leaders with a powerful tool for effective problem-solving.

The levels of the HOP Framework are divided for ease of use, but they are not static. The framework aligns with the concept of dynamic psychology, which acknowledges that "human acts are understandable and predictable only through an analysis of the previous experiences and motivational states of the organism," which exists to counter a lower-level understanding of human behavior "through a simple description of the objective stimuli temporally preceding human acts," (Merriam-Webster, 1999).

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Humans are complex. Leaders should work toward a full understanding of what drives their team's behavior.

HOP Level

High Order Performance 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.

The name also alludes to ambition and top tier performance standards. While lower-order skills for an artist might include the basic techniques of mark-making and the properties of tools like paint or chalk, a fully-realized artist might set out to create the Mona Lisa or the murals of the Sistine Chapel. Herman Melville needed the lower-order skills of grammar and spelling to achieve the higher-level innovation that is *Moby Dick*.

Often, the first step in utilizing the framework includes the identification of a goal – a championship, a promotion, a relationship outcome, or any of the countless tasks required of an Olympian. Once that high order performance outcome has been identified, one can evaluate whether or not systems and behaviors align with it.

GAP Level

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, as we continually emphasize skills like emotion regulation (DeNeve et al, 2023), deliberate practice (Ericsson, 2007), and practical empathy (Davis, 2022). Certain skills are almost universally beneficial, while others can be specifically identified to align with the desired HOP outcome. For relationship outcomes, empathy might be prioritized; to finish an important project on a deadline, grit and resilience might be necessary.

LCR Level

Skills across the framework depend on skills at the LCR level, which refers to Language, Communication, and Relationships. Growth Mindset, for example, made famous by Stanford professor Carol Dweck, is an effective tool for long term success (Dweck, 1988). Growth mindset depends on the way one names an obstacle and frames their approach to navigating challenge. This requires a deliberate cultivation of self-talk and, often, effective communication with other stakeholders. When a leader tells her team that the mission they face is impossible, and that they are frustrated that a commanding officer is putting them in such a disadvantageous position, that will impact mindsets and subsequent behavior. The power of behavioral priming is real (Weingarten et al, 2016). Even the act of motivation, a task of all leaders, requires a leader to align with the motives of their people... without curiosity, relationships, and effective communication, a shared motive is difficult to establish. The way one uses languages, communicates, and relates to people and environment plays a powerful role in performance.

EMS Level (Bedrock)

The nuances of human experience are irrelevant if the body's fundamental needs are not met. Consider that the evolved outer cortex of the brain, capable of designing and constructing spacecrafts, evolved *after* the limbic system, which is responsible for our deeper and more essential needs (Rakic, 2009). On a biological level, emotion, hunger, and sleep-drive come first. Higher-level outcomes evolved over time to ease the procurement of those basic needs. When needs are not met, the body might deprioritize high level cognition, empathy, and creativity to respond to the physiological alarm bells (Holding et al, 2019; Steinberg, 1997). After all, there is no need to contemplate string theory and muse on the nature of the universe when one is on all fours in the desert, desperate for a drop of water.

For this reason, we can most effectively shift resources to higher levels if the limbic foundation is settled. This is most true over time. We can push through sleep deprivation temporarily. We can fast temporarily. But to standardize these physiologically degrading behaviors pre-determines the limited and stunted pursuit of our higher capacities (much like the impact of the wrestling coaching having early practices).

While the research behind this concept is vast, an aware leader can easily understand that a malnourished, sedentary, sleep-deprived human does not stand its best chance to fulfill its potential. As leadership expert Dr. Alan Watkins explains it, "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).

Once we are aware of this wholistic approach to performance, we can begin to evaluate it. In a driven population, the Sleep component of the Bedrock foundation might be the first to go.

Sleep Deprivation and Accountability

Think back to the last time you had a poor night's sleep. Maybe the dog was barking, a baby was crying, or you drank one too many cups of coffee in the late afternoon. How did you feel the next day? Recent science suggests that you likely had trouble concentrating (Andrillon et al., 2017), had greater emotional reactivity (Rosales-Lagarde et al., 2012) , and made more errors at work (Maija-Riikka et al., 2010). All of this degrades performance.

Even more important than student performance is student safety. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention claims that sleep deprivation leads to depression, heart disease, obesity, and type 2 diabetes (Centers for Disease Control, 2022). And if that is not alarming enough, consider that sleep deprivation is linked to the top two leading causes of death in adolescents: accidents (namely, car crashes) and suicide (Oxford University Press, 2018; Jin Lee et al., 2012).

No amount of coffee, exercise, or self-talk can replace the benefits of a healthy night of sleep.

In a recent survey, we found an alarming write-in from a high school student: "I can't read/write/think straight, I haven't had more than five hours of sleep this week." It is a line that all educators should be asked to confront, since the terrible paradox of modern education, especially within highly motivated students, is sadly obvious. This young student, 14-years-old at the time, was doing everything in her power to succeed, not recognizing that those extra hours of study were inhibiting her ability to perform, all while setting the table for the unfortunate health outcomes mentioned above. In the name of self-enhancement, students are sacrificing self-preservation.

And it's not their fault.

One concern is the glamorization of sleep deprivation from self-help gurus on social media. Famous and assumedly well-intended speakers often make heroes of those who are inclined to give up sleep, proudly referring to them as *beasts*, and chiding those who prioritize rest, passing them off as harmless gazelles. It may seem silly, but people are watching.

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Impressionable students are listening. And in one of the Internet's most famous motivational videos, "How Bad Do You Want It? (Success)," narrated by motivational speaker Eric Thomas, nearly 45 million people have tuned in to learn that "If you're going to be successful, you've got to be willing to give up sleep. ... If you really want to be successful, some days you're going to have to stay up three days in a row [sic], because if you go to sleep, you might miss the opportunity to be successful." It is a dangerous message.

Sadly, it does not end in pop culture.

Educational institutions are sending a similar message. Adolescent circadian rhythms make it difficult for teens to fall asleep before 11 p.m., and they stay in a what the National Sleep Foundation refers to as a circadian "dip" until 7 a.m. or later (Sun et al., 2023). The American Academy of Pediatrics and the CDC both recommend school start times begin no earlier than 8:30 a.m. Schools are not listening. The average school start time in the United States is 8:03 a.m. (Wheaton et al., 2015).

Worse still, many institutions offer classes that begin before the regular school day. Oftentimes, it is the motivated students who bear the heaviest burden. If these extra classes begin at 7:15, say, then allowing time for a student to shower, dress, and commute would demand a wakeup in the neighborhood of 6 or 6:30 a.m. Students in more urban areas who take public transportation might find themselves waking up at 5:30 or earlier. This is not a strategy for success, and it has not always been this way.

Sleep deprivation is a recent epidemic. Americans have been sleeping fewer and fewer hours per night over recent years, down one full hour since the 1940s, to a measly 6.8 hours per night. The CDC recommends 8–10 hours for adolescents, 7–9 hours for adults — which makes us, on average, a sleep-deprived nation.

If we expect accountability from athletes, we should hold ourselves accountable as well — for their current and future wellness, if nothing else. Car crashes, disease, potentially increasing the risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease — there is no counterbalance to the detrimental effects of sleep deprivation (Shokri-Kojori et al., 2018). As we construct systems to educate our young people and usher them down the river of their lives, does our behavior match our goal?

Adults are Feeling it as Well

Brian shut the door to his office and leaned back in his chair. He took a few deep breaths. There was tension behind his eyes and in his jaw — he had been grinding his teeth in his sleep. It had been a long day. A few months of long days. Brian was the leader of a small team within a major organization. Success was an expectation and he found it. He would arrive to work early and stay late. His devotion was

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recognized by those he led but, on this day, reclined and rubbing his temples in a dark office, something was wrong.

He did not have the flu, or at least he didn't think so, but he felt off. Mental and physical tension were high. Interaction with his peers had been suffering. Before taking this moment to himself, he had raised his voice at a coworker, sent an angry message to his wife, and was caught in the fumes of varied frustration. Things seemed to be crumbling around him. By noon he decided to call off for the day. He had not taken a sick day in years.

He says he does not remember the drive home, but he does remember making himself some tea and sitting down on the couch. The tea was too hot, so he set it down for a moment. The next thing he remembers is waking up in the dark, laying down now, after an unintentional five-hour nap. He brushed his teeth, went to bed, and slept through the night.

The next day he was fine.

Simply, Brian was exhausted. Sometimes we use the term 'exhausted' to describe a long day, to add emphasis to our fatigue. Brian was *actually* exhausted – drained of physical and mental capacity. In this state, physical and emotional health fail, as do our relationships and our potential to lead.

Versions of this story play out time and time again. When they are prolonged throughout a career, they can be far more serious, with leaders ending up in the hospital or worse. And of course, the quality of leadership falters.

The Leadership Team

This past year we conducted a workshop (alongside a variety of surveys) to support a leadership team at a successful organization. The group we worked with was high achieving. By any quantifiable measure, they were at the top of their field. In addition to their impressive track record, they scored **very high** in the areas of grit, growth, gratitude, and goal directed behavior. It was clear that the group possessed many essential skills for success.

The leadership team's culture was also commendable. The group scored **very high** in the primary areas of workplace relationships, including three big ones: 1) quality of relationships within the organization, 2) quality of relationships within the leadership team, and 3) feelings of physical and emotional safety.

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A skilled leadership team in a healthy workplace culture should translate to positive outcomes, right? In this case, the quantifiable successes were clear, but something was lurking underneath the surface...

In response to the prompt "I have plenty of time to do what's requested of me during the day," the group highly disagreed, with an average score of 3/10 (where a score of 10 indicated full agreement with the associated statement). In response to the prompt "I have more work than I am capable of completing," the group agreed (7.1/10); and to the prompt "I have more work than I am capable of completing with a high level of quality," the group highly agreed (8.21/10).

Although the leaders were highly skilled, and operating within a quality work environment, they were feeling overwhelmed by their work. Worse still, in response to the prompt "how would you rate your overall mental health?" 60% of the team reported a 6 or below out of 10. Self-reports on physical health were even lower, with 70% of the team reporting low scores.

Low health scores (both mental and physical) and more work than the group can complete with a high level of quality creates an unsustainable situation. While the leadership group appreciated one another, believed that they were doing meaningful work, and seemed to be successful, there was clearly an unidentified variable in the mix.

Sleep data was also collected through our survey. What we found was enlightening, though not surprising. So we kept looking. Degradation at the Bedrock level was limiting the quality of their work and relationships. There were cracks in their HOP foundation.

Rest Well

Sleep quantity (total hours of sleep) continues to be a dependable metric when other biometrics like heart rate and respiration rate are not available. As we analyzed the group's data, sleep quantity responses were broken into two categories, Adequate (8+ hours) and Inadequate (6.5 or fewer hours), before being cross tabulated with other wellness responses. Sleep impacted this leadership group in three important areas: interpretation of workplace stressors, motivation, and optimism in workplace communication.

Interpretation of stressors as "negative" in quality had a convincing alignment with sleep duration. In the inadequate sleep group (6.5 hours or fewer), 100% of respondents acknowledged that the quality of their stress during the week of the survey was negative (the team's average score was 6.7/10, with 10 being most negative). The opposite was true in the well-rested group. **None** of the respondents in the adequate

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sleep group (8 or more hours per night) believed the stress they experienced that week was excessively negative, and the group average was only 2.7/10.

The trend continued. In the group reporting inadequate sleep, motivation was significantly lower than their well-rested peers. In response to the prompt, “I often feel motivated to come to work,” the group who slept 8 or more hours per night averaged 9.2/10 (with 10 being complete agreement with the statement), while the inadequate sleep group averaged 6.4/10.

In questions regarding healthy communication with peers, the adequate sleep group found it easy to maintain optimism in their communication (8.9/10) while the inadequate sleep group reported maintaining optimism to be more difficult (6.4/10). Furthermore, the adequate sleep group seems to be more comfortable clarifying difficult ideas with coworkers (9/10) than the inadequate sleep group (7.1/10). The trend was becoming more and more clear.

These results align with previous studies which indicate sleep duration as a primary variable in the interpretation of one’s environment. They also align with good logic. If two people – one well-rested, the other sleep deprived – encounter the same challenge (say, rush hour traffic or a difficult conversation with a peer), the sleep deprived person would likely interpret the experience in a more negative way. In short, sleep deprivation makes people more negative (Cohut, 2019). Survey results from these sleep deprived leaders appeared to prove this out.

William Shakespeare famously suggested that “Nothing [is] either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.” Author and philosopher Ryan Holiday agrees that “through our perception of events, we are complicit in their creation.” If perception is so essential to the way we experience and manage our lives, then leaders would be wise to acknowledge the variables which impact perception. The way a leader interprets their environment is essential to their decision-making. It is possible that inadequate sleep was impacting the perception of the leaders, degrading their ability to lead well.

Lead Well

So, we beat on, boats against the current, achieving in spite of ourselves. And therein lies the problem. At the Good Athlete Project, we refer to the phenomenon of successfully navigating the world while regularly ignoring one’s degraded state as the “Talent Delusion.” High-achievers find themselves achieving at a high level, obviously enough; that said, they might never reach their full potential, since they exist regularly in a degraded state. It is those high-achievers who preach their methods to the world, insisting that sleep is a convenience, rather than a necessity.

Societal memes arise from these faulty paradigms, and it is not the high-achievers who are most likely to suffer. It's the disenfranchised. It's the under-supported young students who take these words as gospel. These are dangerous messages to spread and they are coming from sources who do not feel the full weight of that danger.

Coaches, sleep deprivation and the denial of basic psychological and physiological needs is not a badge of honor.

It is an indicator that top end performance will ultimately suffer. It might not happen right away, but eventually, biology will win.

Improving sleep will not solve all problems, but in most cases, it will influence the way those problems are perceived. During the 4th century BC, Lao Tzu inked the third verse of the Tao te Ching on a thin sheet of bamboo. "Thus, the Sage rules / by stilling minds and opening hearts / by filling bellies and strengthening bones" – he was talking about leadership (how the Sage rules) beginning with mental and physical health. Health for the leader *and* for those he hopes to lead.

Coaches, educators, and institutions do not have to take all of this into account. 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. We keep offering support for those struggling with mental health concerns. But layering surface-level interventions on top of a chronically degraded physical state is like icing a cake that is not fully baked.

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If we are truly hoping to teach lessons for life, we should be teaching for wellness – at the Bedrock level and beyond. Our students' ability to thrive within their environments, their health, and perhaps even their lives, may depend on it.

There are many challenges ahead. Step up to them. Prioritizing wellness is not always easy, but it will always be worth it.

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