You’re On! Consulting for Peak Performance

By Kate F. Hays and Charles H. Brown, Jr. Copyright 2004 by American Psychological Association, 750 First Street, NE, Washington, DC 20002

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To date, the majority of books devoted to the topic of performance consulting have been published by individuals with academic training in sport psychology or exercise science and deal with the provision of mental training services for elite athletes. In the book, You’re On! Consulting for Peak Performance, Kate Hays and Charles Brown offer a nice supplement to this literature by targeting the performance experiences of experts in non-sporting contexts. Their work is based on the results of extensive qualitative interviews conducted with expert performers and performance consultants in business (e.g., law, insurance, advertising, banking), high-risk professions (e.g., surgeon, police, sniper) and the performing arts (acting, music, dance, broadcasting). The result is an insightful tutorial that any practitioner interested in offering performance consultation will find quite enlightening.

The book is organized into five sections. In the first section (chapters 1 and 2), the authors provide a general overview of the field of performance psychology from the perspectives of sport psychology, performance coaching (e.g., executive coaching, life coaching), and psychotherapy. In addition, these chapters offer information describing the qualitative research approach that was used to obtain interview data from performance experts and consultants.

In Section II, Hays and Brown discuss the domain-specific results that emerged from the responses of experts in business (chapter 3), high-risk professions (chapter 4), and the performing arts (chapter 5). Then, in Section III, they describe the key elements of performance that seemed to characterize the experiences of experts in all three fields. The first category of elements is foundational (chapter 6) and includes the performer’s basic abilities, a coherent sense of self, and self-care (e.g., nutrition, rest, exercise). The second category, preparation (chapters 7 and 8), includes knowledge of the most effective strategies and methods for performing, a commitment to technical preparation, and the necessity of task practice under circumstances that simulate as closely as possible the actual performance context. Even though the majority of experts interviewed reported no formal mental skills training, most appeared to incorporate a number of traditional mental skills into their performance preparation. These skills included goal setting, activation (i.e., arousal) management, imagery, thought management, attention management, pre-performance mental preparation plans, performance focus plans, and refocusing plans. The final category of key performance elements experts talked about is the performance itself. This element consists of the experience of stress (chapter 9), the process of coping with stress (chapter 10), and the components of peak performance and flow (chapter 11).

In Section IV, Hays and Brown summarize what the experts said they wanted and needed from performance consultants. The results revealed four general
categories of client needs: assessment (i.e., problem identification), education (i.e., technical information encompassing mechanical and physiological aspects of the performance domain, interpersonal and relationship skills, mental skills, and intrapersonal skills), support, and career development. When asked their opinion about the characteristics of an ideal consultant (chapter 13), the experts emphasized four considerations: credibility, presentation (i.e., attitude, style), interpersonal issues (e.g., nature of the relationship), and demographic features (i.e., age, gender). Potentially harmful consultant characteristics (chapter 14) the experts discussed included the provision of useless or unrealistic suggestions, poor skills (e.g., lacklustre presentation, inattentiveness to individual needs, the fostering of client dependence, the undermining of client confidence, inadequate follow-through), and unattractive personal qualities (e.g., presumptuousness, the “canned” approach, the authoritative attitude, unethical behavior).

In the fifth and final section of the book, the authors summarize the responses of the performance consultants they interviewed. These findings primarily converged around the themes of training and turf concerns (i.e., the necessary qualifications of a consultant), ethical concerns (i.e., recognizing one’s own boundaries or limits of practice), aspects of appropriate preparation (i.e., formal academic training, postdegree training, performance experience, informal training, formative life experiences), and the standards for assessing competence, including a special section on ethical issues and standards (chapter 15). In chapter 16, Hays and Brown conclude their book by discussing the notion of “consultant as performer.” Based on the results of their interviews, the authors suggest that the successful consultant/performer must possess a number of foundational skills (counseling, facilitating change, knowledge of performance excellence, knowledge of physiological aspects of performance, and knowledge of systems), domain-specific knowledge, and contextual intelligence. However, Hays and Brown emphasize the point that “merely having knowledge is not necessarily equivalent to good consultation. A consultant must be able to engage the client (my italics added) and deliver advice in a fashion such that the client wants to participate (my italics added) in the process” (p. 286). All in all, this book conveys the message that effective performance consultation is both a science and an art.

My own academic training and professional experience is in the area of sport and exercise science and for the past 20 years, I have provided performance consulting for elite athletes in a number of sports at both the amateur and professional levels. I was, therefore, curious to hear what individuals coming from backgrounds in clinical (Kate Hays) and counseling (Charles Brown) psychology had to say about consulting for peak performance. What I encountered was an extremely well written and enlightening book that dispelled some of the apprehension I (and I suspect a number of other sport psychology consultants with backgrounds like my own) have for licensed psychologists who provide performance consultation. Hays and Brown shed considerable light on the expanding field of performance psychology and, while their target audience is primarily psychologists and other mental health professionals, their book is a must read for sport psychology consultants as well. Particularly helpful are the numerous and poignant quotes from the participants interviewed as well as a list of recommendations for consultants situated at the end of most chapters. In my view, You’re On! Consulting for Peak Performance is an essential volume for anyone interested in the topic of performance enhancement and an important addition to the literature in this field.