

FEATURE ARTICLE

# Using the High Order Performance Framework for Effective Leadership

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Leaders, does your behavior match your goal? For those interested in leadership and character development, the first task is to build awareness and intentionality around the direction in which you hope to lead. Identify a goal. Only then can you create a culture, articulate a plan, and install feedback and enforcement mechanisms to align subsequent behaviors. In doing so, remember that the human condition is complex. As a leader, are you aware of *all* the components that impact high order performance outcomes? Are you creating situations that give your people a strong opportunity to succeed, or are you subconsciously degrading their top end performance? Effective leaders are not always perfect, but they must be aware of the myriad contributing factors at play. Effective leaders clarify objectives and thoughtfully craft environments. They set their people up for success.

Even with clear objectives, leadership misalignments have unfortunately been normalized. We create systems that hinge on immediate gratification, then wonder why work ethic is not stronger. We serve students unhealthy food, then wonder why they act out or nod off during the second half of the school day (Wiles et al., 2009). A father might say he cares for his family more than anything, but is cranky and distant when he comes home. At the same dinner table, a teenager who loves his mom might be short and unintentionally cruel. Coaches create cultures that do not serve their team's ambitions and infighting among teammates (who allegedly share a purpose) is all too common. Where do these misalignments come from?

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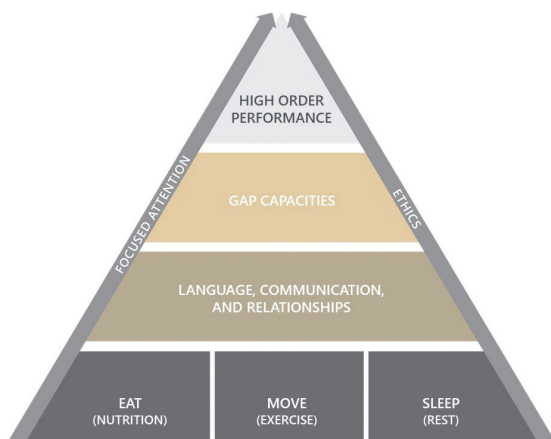
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One tool that has been developed to help leaders set their teams up for success is the High Order Performance (HOP) Framework (Figure 1). It helps leaders evaluate situations and guide their teams toward positive outcomes. The tool, created at Harvard University, has been used to evaluate essential components of performance and maintain awareness of how those components interact (Davis, 2023). The framework fits into a category referred to as a content model. Notable content models include the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) framework for social emotional learning (Borowski, 2019) and Abraham Maslow's famous hierarchy of needs which, like the HOP Framework, also highlights the essential role of physiological requirements in the pursuit of self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). A primary differentiating factor in the HOP Framework occurs at the "Bedrock" level, highlighted by three categories: Eat (nutrition), Move (physical activity), and Sleep (rest/recovery). Too often, similar frameworks neglect the role of the body in high level cognitive processing and overall performance. This framework highlights the impact of the physical state on cognitive, social, emotional, and what we refer to as "high-order performance" capacities.

**Figure 1**  
*High Order Performance Framework*



The HOP framework is a content model intended to support performance across domains. It can be used for an individual, a team of people, an organization, and at the level of public health. It offers the user a research-based, experience-validated, usable, and effective tool after years of field research, and battle-testing the approach with more than 40 state and national championship teams as well as leaders from a variety of professional fields (Davis, 2023).

The model was developed with the recognition that, even with clear intentions, leaders will occasionally misunderstand the components of human behavior and make decisions that do not serve their end goal. During a Good Athlete Project engagement with a Chicago-area wrestling team, we worked with a successful coach who was trying to add another state championship to his resume. The goal-directed coach had created a situation where certain outcomes had been unintentionally prioritized over variables that limited the likelihood of those outcomes...without awareness of the incongruity. The HOP Framework allowed for thoughtful assessment of the situation, behavioral alignment with the motives of the coach, and empowerment for more effective leadership.

### Good Intentions

The coach started practice at 5:30am. He believed these early mornings would teach toughness and discipline. The team responded well to the challenge and 4:30am wakeup calls became the norm. With puffy eyes and heavy feet, they would stroll in, tired but ready to work. This part of his approach was successful. His team was tough.

"But they're just not listening," said the coach, referring to the fact that the students did not seem to be retaining information from practice. Whether it was a new skill or a logistical note, like when to be on the bus for an upcoming tournament, details did not seem to stick. He also noted that, although team discipline was high, many of the athletes were having a tough time making weight.

“John,” captain of the wrestling team, was dedicated. He got out of his car at 5:10 am in the winter dark, put his hood up and braved the wind and snow on his walk toward the practice facility. He and his teammates nodded to each other but did not talk much, still groggy, but determined. Once they had all assembled in the wrestling room, which was sweltering with radiator heat, the coach blew a whistle and they automatically entered a pre-practice warmup. They trained hard. John was a leader, challenging, encouraging, and listening intently to cues from the head coach.

This morning, the team had to do a few extra accountability drills at the end of practice because, the night before, a few of them were late to the bus heading to a dual meet across town. “Honestly,” John admitted, “[the athletes who were late] care a lot and just forgot.” He was echoing one of the coach’s concerns that, more often than normal, information did not seem to stick with this group. While there were countless possible factors at play, sleep deprivation was an immediate concern.

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). Especially on mornings like these when, after the previous night’s match, the athletes did not return to campus until 10:30 pm, sleep deprivation was not possible, it was pre-determined. Many acknowledged, including John, that after commuting from campus to home, then eating and showering, the earliest they could be in bed was midnight. At best. With alarms set before 5:00 am, the schedule made sleep deprivation an absolute outcome. The schedule was impacting the athletes’ attention and memory.

The coach also noted a secondary concern about athletes making weight. Wrestlers compete in classes determined by bodyweight. In order to compete in the 170 lb weight class, for example, the wrestler has to

weigh-in on the day of competition to confirm that their bodyweight is true to their division. This often requires disciplined nutritional practices. These guys had discipline. Discipline was not enough. Sleep deprivation was again the suspected culprit.

Sleep deprivation modulates ghrelin and leptin, two key hormones responsible for hunger, satiation, and what sort of food people crave (Taheri et al., 2004). In a study of more than 1,000 participants, sleep deprivation reduced leptin, raised ghrelin, and correlated strongly with weight gain and increased BMI (body-mass index). In other words, chronic sleep deprivation was unintentionally impeding athletes’ ability to maintain their desired body weight. Turning down a Snicker’s bar was not impossible, but the schedule-induced sleep deprivation was stacking the deck against the desired outcome.

The schedule, while well-intentioned (making sure the team was tough and psychologically prepared), seemed to be inadvertently setting the athletes up for failure. During our post-practice debrief and professional development session, we realized that something had to be adjusted – either the schedule, or the expectations. We discussed the HOP framework to guide self- and system-level reflection as well as future strategy. To ensure receptivity with the coach and his staff, we reminded them that coaches, parents, schools, corporations, even governments routinely experience these types of well-intended misalignments (Kerr, 1995). Forgive yourselves and be willing to reevaluate, we suggested. After all, the challenge for this team was not a matter of discipline, toughness, or intellect. Physiological processes were set into motion which, due to significant sleep deprivation, contributed predictably to certain outcomes (toughness, mindset) and degraded others (attention, cognition, body weight). The challenge was to step back and rearrange the system, with a more wholistic approach. Once aware of the situation, he altered the practice schedule, and now has the HOP Framework taped up above his desk.

## Levels of Performance

Understanding should precede problem-solving. It is the only place to start. 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, 2013, 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 2 h 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, 2013, 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 "mental experience and behavior [is] a function of the interaction of motivational, affective, and cognitive variables of different degrees of intensity or strength," which exists to counter a lower-level understanding of human behavior through simple descriptions and face-value assessments (Wolitzky, 2010; Woodworth, 1930). Humans are complex. Leaders should work toward a full understanding of what drives their team's behavior.

Just like the well-intentioned wrestling coach, leaders can conduct similar evaluations on individual and organizational levels. What would happen if the coach were

regularly sleep deprived? Everyone in the school? Everyone in the city? This is not hyperbole. We are, unfortunately, a sleep deprived nation with effects seen... (Davis, 2019).

### *HOP Level*

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).

The name also alludes to ambition and top-tier performance standards. Menial tasks can be accomplished without considering the framework. While it can be used to navigate a variety of pursuits, the HOP Framework is best suited for the ambitious and goal-directed.

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 essential tasks required of an Air Force pilot. Once that HOP outcome has been identified, one can evaluate whether or not systems and behaviors align with achieving it.

By sitting atop the Framework, the HOP level highlights the fact that elite performance outcomes are built over time and require the onboarding of lower-order

skills. Talent aside, the most exceptional conflict negotiator will require a more basic understanding of language and grammar in order to relay their ideas. Herman Melville needed the lower-order skills of grammar and spelling to achieve the higher-level innovation that is *Moby Dick*. Even Leonardo DaVinci needed to mix paint and clean a brush before he could bring the Mona Lisa to life; in fact, he did not paint his most celebrated piece until he was fifty-one years old, onboarding a plethora of lower-order skills in order to create his highest outcomes.

### *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 (De Neve 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. Effective use of skills at this level often depend on the levels below it (Anderson et al., 2001).

### *LCR Level*

Language, Communication, and Relationships impact performance and, bold as it may sound, the nature of one's existence. How we relate to others and our constantly evolving environment is central to any pursuit. Communication is so important that it is, perhaps, our first skill; both child and parent are in tune at the moment of the first cry. As we develop, the language we use to communicate, relate, and even talk to ourselves (self-talk) has dramatic impacts on the way we

experience the world (Kim et al, 2021). Cognitive and dialectical behavioral therapies use language to navigate intense emotions, social relationships, and steer self-directed behavior (Panos et al, 2014). Personal mantras are increasingly common in performance psychology and improving outcomes. LCR impacts motivation and connection. It creates the gameplan and allows for adaptation. It allows us to share ideas like the ones in this article. Language matters.

Additionally, 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 mission they face is impossible, and publicly demeans the commanding officer who has put them in such a disadvantageous position, that will impact mindsets and subsequent behaviors. Conversely, if the language that leader used was 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 and Aarts, 2005). The power of behavioral priming is real; the way we name challenges has an impact on the way we behave in their presence (Weingarten et al, 2016). Even the act of motivation, a task required of all leaders, depends on alignment with the motives of stakeholders. Without curiosity, relationships, and effective communication, a shared motive is difficult to establish. The importance of intentionally developing skills at this level cannot be overstated. Leaders should practice and share methods on effective use of language, communication, and relationships with their teams. They should recognize its importance and set institutional standards for effective interaction. And keep in mind that it is all influenced by Bedrock.

*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 et al, 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 coach having early practices).

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). Leaders should build this awareness within themselves and continue

that awareness as they construct systems and expectations for those within their charge.

Can we build psychological resilience to endure a degraded physiological state? Can you go to work and power through on 4 h of sleep? Of course. One should be tough, resilient, and in control of self-talk to perform in the face of that challenge. It happens all the time. But it should not be the norm, and it should not be imposed by leaders who truly want the best for those in their charge. Leaders have an opportunity to reflect on the distinction between surviving and thriving. With clear direction and a compliant team, we all have the potential to lead people from point A to point B. The most thoughtful, effective leaders will work to create situations where their people may grow and thrive, and ultimately achieve their highest potential.

## An Integrated Approach to Empowerment

We must all be wary of any one-stop-shop, silver bullet, or social meme that begins with "the key to success is \_\_\_\_\_." If a key to success was even possible, it would be a concept, not an action. It would not be namable in a soundbite, but require a wholistic view of the environment, the self, and as many contextual factors as one is able to understand.

Leaders should be willing to go up and down the Framework, using it as a guide rather than a prescription. Notice how its components influence one another. While someone might have built the skills utilized by elite performers, a malnourished, sedentary, sleep-deprived version of themselves might not have the ability to access them. In that state, emotion regulation would be impacted alongside their ability to creatively solve problems (Saghir, 2018). Sleep-deprivation might have impacted their mental health and ability to maintain optimism in the face of adversity (Davis, 2021). Their physiological state would have limited their ability to access previously developed skills. Skills at any



level will be either enhanced or degraded by the physical state of the user. When the Bedrock foundation is solid, they would theoretically have full access.

Antonio Damasio taught us that “mind derives from the entire organism as an ensemble” (Damasio, 1994). The human condition is complex. All contributing components impact the whole. If that sounds like a lot of work, it is. Or it can feel like it at first. Like any sort of training, working toward wholistic understanding gets easier over time, especially when the benefits become clear.

When outcomes do not align with intention, when performance falters and frustrations rise, it is easy to feel stuck. The HOP Framework provides a way for leaders to help teams become unstuck. Use it to self-check. Check the systems you are creating and those systems within which you operate. Focus on one level at a time, then work to understand how they interact with each other. Focus on it. Change it. And share your strategies along the way. The most powerful form of leadership includes empowering others to effectively take ownership of their outcomes. Leaders, does your behavior match your goal? We should all be able to say yes.

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