

Dealing with Poor Performance

Is it Lack of Ability or is it Low Motivation?

Is one of your gymnasts not performing as well as you had expected? If so, this proverb can take on great significance. To figure out what's causing the performance issue, you have to get to the root of the problem.

Performance is a function of both ability and motivation, that is: $\text{Performance} = \text{Ability} \times \text{Motivation}$

Where:

- Ability is the person's aptitude, as well as the training and apparatus supplied by the gym; and
- Motivation is the product of desire and commitment directly attributed to the gymnast.

A gymnast with 100% motivation and 75% ability can often achieve above-average performance. However, a gymnast with only 25% ability won't be able to achieve the type of performance you expect, regardless of his or her level of motivation.

Diagnosing Poor Performance

Before you can fix poor performance, you have to understand what is causing it.

Does it come from lack of ability or low motivation?

Incorrect diagnoses can lead to lots of problems later on. If you believe a gymnast is not making enough of an effort, you'll likely put increased pressure on him or her to perform. But if the real issue is ability, then increased pressure may only make the problem worse.

Low ability may be associated with the following:

- Trying to teach skills beyond the gymnast's capability.
- Low individual concentration, recall, aptitude and/or knowledge.
- Evidence of strong effort, despite poor performance.
- Lack of improvement over time.

Gymnasts with low ability may be trying to learn skills which are just too demanding of them, either physically or mentally. You may well have to go back and spend some time fixing the basic elements before progressing. They may have passed into a Level that is too demanding for them, or maybe they are no longer with a group that have supported them previously and helped them to perform well.

Improving Motivation

Poor performance often has its roots in low motivation. When this is the case, you need to work closely with the gymnast to create a motivating environment in which to work. There are three key interventions that may improve his or her motivation:

- Setting of performance goals.
 - Provision of performance assistance.
 - Provision of performance feedback.
1. **Performance Goals.** Goal setting is a well-recognized aspect of performance improvement. Gymnasts must understand what's expected of them and agree on what they need to do to improve. See the other articles on Setting Goals; Going for Gold and Personal Motivation.
 2. **Performance Assistance.** Once you have set appropriate goals, help your gymnast succeed by doing the following:

- Regularly assess his or her ability, and take action if it's deficient. Provide the necessary training.
 - Secure any additional resources needed, for example, videos.
 - Encourage co-operation and assistance from parents, other coaches and/or gymnasts.
3. **Performance Feedback.** Everyone needs feedback on their efforts. They have to know where they stand in terms of current performance and long-term expectations. When providing feedback, keep in mind the importance of the following:
- **Timeliness.** Provide feedback as soon as possible. This links the behaviour with the evaluation. Make sure that you provide feedback regularly, not just at competition time.
 - **Openness and Honesty.** Make sure the feedback is accurate. Avoid mixed messages or talking about the person rather than the performance. Provide both positive and negative feedback so that gymnasts can begin to truly understand their strengths and weaknesses.
 - **Personalized Rewards.** A large part of feedback involves rewards and recognition. Make sure that your Club has a system that acknowledges the successes of its gymnasts.

Creating a Performance Improvement Plan

So how do you do this in practice? You need to develop a Performance Improvement Plan. Armed with the strategies we've looked at, you first need to evaluate the performance issue that you're facing:

- Have you discussed with the gymnast to discover what he or she feels the problem is?
- Are you and the Club doing everything you can to recognize and reward your gymnasts?
- Are you rewarding the things that you actually want done?
- Do you have regular goal setting and development meetings with your gymnasts?
- Do you help your gymnasts keep their skills current?

From there, it's important that you and the gymnast discuss and agree upon a plan for improving performance. Write down what you have agreed, along with dates by which goals should be achieved. Monitor progress with the gymnast and use the techniques outlined for increasing motivation and dealing with ability-related issues.

Recognize that the actions needed to close ability gaps need high motivation on the gymnast's part to be successful. The two causes of poor performance - lack of ability and low motivation - are inextricably intertwined, and goal setting, feedback, and a supportive work environment are necessary conditions for improving both.

Key points

For every hundred men cutting off the branches of a diseased tree, only one will stoop to inspect the roots.

Chinese proverb

You need to understand the root of a performance problem before you can fully address it. Ability and motivation go together to impact performance, and the most successful performance improvement efforts combine strategies for improving each. This will create a positive environment where your gymnasts will feel supported to reach their performance potential; and feel valued, knowing that the Club wants to find a good fit for their abilities.

At times, your interventions may not be enough to salvage the situation. As long as you've given performance enhancement your best effort and you have reasonably exhausted all your options, then you can feel confident that you have done all you can for that gymnast.