



Mental Toughness in Business

Why You Should Have It
and How You Can Get It

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MENTAL TOUGHNESS Why You Should Have It and How You Can Get It

Introduction: The Importance of Mental Toughness

Someone achieves something remarkable. It could be a business feat such as beating a sales record, an athletic triumph such as overcoming a deficit to win a game, or even a personal accomplishment such as being generally recognized as a great parent. How did that person do it? Most observers when posed with that question would assume the success had to do with talent, intelligence, or some combination thereof. However, this would not be the most astute observation. In fact, a number of studies indicate that those two factors do not play as big of a role in success as many people think. For example, some research states that intelligence only explains as much as 30% of one's achievement (with the typical figure usually being lower).ⁱ

One renowned research study highlights another factor as being the key ingredient. Published in 2007 in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, it focuses on 2,441 new cadets at West Point, the U.S. military academy. In their first summer on campus, these individuals are required to complete a series of challenging physical, emotional, and mental tests, in a program referred to internally as "Beast Barracks". The study set out to determine which qualities had the biggest impact on ability to do well on the assessments.ⁱⁱ

Researchers examined the cadets' high school rank, SAT scores, Leadership Potential Score (reflecting participation in extracurricular activities), Physical Aptitude Exam (a standardized physical exercise evaluation), and Grit Scale (which measures perseverance and passion for long-term goals). What they found was that it was not intelligence, strength, or leadership potential that correctly forecasted whether or not a cadet completed Beast Barracks. Instead, it was grit. Specifically, cadets who were one standard deviation higher on the Grit Scale were 60% more likely to finish the initiation program than their peers. The researchers went beyond the West Point study sample to demonstrate the influence of grit in other areas – for example, Ivy League undergrads with a higher grit score had higher GPAs than their peers, and National Spelling Bee participants outperformed their peers due to grit and committed practice, rather than IQ.ⁱⁱⁱ

There is another name for this special quality that is responsible for so much success – "mental toughness". Mental toughness is often misunderstood by many leaders, entrepreneurs, and professionals. It does not mean you have to be a bully, displaying unruly, arrogant behavior toward someone or something in order to convince others of your mental superiority. Because none of us is born with mental toughness, it is an inner strength we can cultivate and a skill we can learn.

There are a number of definitions for this term, but the one we define that best encapsulates what it means is as follows:

DEFINITION: MENTAL TOUGHNESS

Mental toughness is responding resiliently to pressures, setbacks, adversities and challenges. It is an emotional toughness enabling you to remain emotionally steady while continuing to make rational decisions under pressure. It is the 'true grit' that helps you work through difficult situations, remaining focused on your goal. Grit means strength of character, not giving up, and the ability to persevere until a satisfactory resolution has been reached.

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University psychology professor Dr. Peter Clough has completed much research on this topic. In his book *Developing Mental Toughness* (co-authored with Dough Strycharczyk), he estimates that the trait accounts for up to 25% of variation in performance. He also identifies four key attributes that constitute mental toughness, known widely as “The Four Cs”; they are as follows:^{iv}

1. **Commitment:** This attribute measures how and why we set goals and also how we respond to them. At the high end of the scale are individuals who are able to handle and achieve things when faced with tough and unyielding deadlines.
2. **Challenge:** This attribute addresses how we, as individuals, respond to change. At the high end of the scale are individuals who thrive in continually changing environments.
3. **Confidence:** This attribute measures the extent to which we have self-belief to see through to a conclusion a difficult task that can be beset with setbacks. Individuals high in confidence successfully complete tasks that may be considered too difficult by others with similar abilities but lower esteem.
4. **Control:** This attribute measures the extent to which people think they are in control of their life. Individuals with high emotional control keep their anxiety in check, and those with high life control feel their plans will not be thwarted and that they can make a difference.

All of this information is helpful in understanding how mental toughness helps us to succeed in general. But why is it so important to the corporate sector, specifically?

The answer is that the world of business is complex, and continues to grow more so. Major developments ranging from globalization to talent shortages to the rapid pace of technological advancements have served to make an executive’s job that much more challenging, and executives have not been shy about saying as much. In a survey by IBM of 1,500 Chief Executive Officers worldwide, respondents identified the escalation of complexity as their number one concern. Further, 79% said that they expect even greater complexity in the future, and most believe that their companies are not equipped to deal with such dense challenges.^v This last sentiment is not entirely surprising. In today’s highly competitive business climate, traditional education often falls short in equipping high achievers to win at work and succeed in life. This is because you need more than education and experience to succeed in business. You need a strong and disciplined mind.



This is where mental toughness comes in. It helps get you through critical moments of performance amidst the rapid changes and ambiguities creating today’s uncertain business environment. Steve Bergholtz, senior facilities consultant at Interline Brands, sums it up nicely: “Regardless of what is going on today in the world, you must make the decision not to yield to its pressure. The only control you have is how you respond to the situation or challenge. Being mentally tough enables me to be more creative in my approach to business. It gives me the competitive edge to outperform my competitors both professionally and monetarily.”

It’s useful to know how important mental toughness in the business world, but as you know, it is a world that likes results. As such, this paper will provide evidence of how having this characteristic has provided tangible benefits to executives, as well as identify methods for increasing it so those results can be yours.

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The Benefits of Mental Toughness in the Business World

The concept of mental toughness is typically associated with the sports world; indeed, it has its origins in research on sports psychology. There is a logical reason for this. Athletes spend the majority of their time in a high-pressure environment – one involving intense, physical competition against others, in front of both fans and detractors, with an imperative to achieve a specific goal within a compressed period of time. This unique atmosphere forces them to learn how to quickly conquer their fears and stresses in order to achieve victory. This mentality extends beyond the court or playing field. Even when not competing, athletes must push themselves when training and demonstrate discipline in their diet in order to maintain physical upkeep.

Because mental toughness is closely connected with athletics, research has been conducted on its influence in competition outcomes. A recent study by Caliper, a consulting company based in Princeton, N.J., examined 150 Major League Baseball players who had generated at least 350 at bats between 2000 and 2012. The players took the Caliper Profile, a self-reported, work-focused personality assessment that measures 18 personality traits and abstract reasoning ability. The study found that players with mental toughness have an ability to perform well under stress, keep their emotions in check and are able to bounce back quickly when things go badly. Those with this trait performed better in key performance statistics such as on-base plus slugging (OPS), a statistic that reflects a player’s ability to get on base and advance base runners, and is considered among the most predictive of team wins. Of course, players had the physical talent to start.^{vi}

While the worlds of sports and business are not exactly the same, they share the reality of frequent high-pressure situations. Executives are charged with achieving goals that are always increasing in difficulty while heading off constant competitive threats within specified periods of time. Rising to this challenge necessitates a psychological profile akin to that of an athlete, one that allows the exec to keep “rolling with the punches.” Business leaders recognize the importance of this quality to their organizations. In a nationwide survey conducted by Price Pritchett, 300 CEOs were asked to name the most important traits of their companies; specific questions included “What makes an organization strong?” and “What do you measure to determine its power?” The study’s results showed that the top answers were “staying power”, “can-do attitude”, and “resilience”, all characteristics associated with mental toughness:



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It's great that CEOs are aware of the importance of mental toughness, but many are probably not aware that there are actual results attesting to its value, as there are with the sports world. Below are summaries of three studies whose results help provide a business case for executives emphasizing this quality.

The Benefits of Mental Toughness on Perception

A 2009 study published in the *Journal of Management* examined the impact of positive CEO psychological traits such as resilience and optimism on corporations. Results showed that having these traits often leads to a perception of transformational leadership, which in turn can positively affect company performance. Specifically:^{vii}

- Resilient leaders are more successful in obtaining their followers' trust, respect, and "buy-in", which are the main components of the idealized influence dimension of transformational leadership.
- Leaders with a clear and confident vision of the future are more likely to be perceived as influential and thus transformational leaders. Conversely less resilient leaders, who often appear either ambivalent or emotionally-unfulfilled, are less likely to be seen as influential.
- The extent to which leaders are rated as transformational fully mediates the relationship between the leaders' positive psychological traits and their company's' performance.

The Benefits of Mental Toughness on Performance

Dr. Peter Clough designed his aforementioned survey to measure mental toughness, called MTQ48, taking into account the "Four Cs": commitment, challenge, confidence, and control.

Clough conducted a series of studies in which he deployed the survey. One involved 126 managers attending an assessment and development center. They were first given the survey to determine their mental toughness level at the start of the survey. They were then assigned a number of tasks and activities to ascertain the impact their mental toughness had on their performance. Findings indicated that those with higher levels were more likely to perform better in a wide variety of areas.

Mental Toughness was measured in the following categories, with those ranking highest in MTQ48 demonstrating significantly better performance capabilities, specifically ix:

- Total Mental Toughness: more likely to perform better in the Team Video Exercise as well as the Team Presentation Exercise.
- Challenge: more likely to perform better in the Team Video Exercise.
- Life Control: more likely to perform better in the Team Video Exercise.
- Emotional Control: more likely to perform better in the Planning Exercise.
- Confidence: more likely to perform better in the Written Critique Exercise.
- Interpersonal Confidence: more likely to perform better in the Team Video Exercise as well as the Team Presentation Exercise.

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The Benefits of Mental Toughness on Career Advancement

One of the most prominent studies on mental toughness examines how it influences professional achievement – specifically, the ability to rise to higher levels of management. The 2009 analysis, published in the *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, used a sample of 522 senior, middle, and junior managers whose participants were given the MTQ48. Results showed that senior managers demonstrated higher mental toughness levels than middle and junior management. Specifically:^{viii}

- Senior managers demonstrated the highest levels of mental toughness recorded, also scoring significantly higher on five of the six subscales.
- Middle managers demonstrated the next highest mental toughness profile, scoring higher than junior managers and clerical staff on total mental toughness, life control, ability confidence and interpersonal confidence, and higher than clerical staff on challenge and commitment.
- Junior managers' mental toughness profile was similar to that of clerical staff.

The study's authors say that the results “could suggest that mental toughness can be a significant indicator of potential for level of achievement and managerial position attained”, mentioning the possibility that “mental toughness could be developed through appropriate training.”

As these analyses demonstrate, having mental toughness can lead to a number of positive outcomes for business leaders. The following case profile illustrates one particular example involving a CEO.^{ix}



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CASE PROFILE: HOW A DERAILED LEADER GOT BACK ON TRACK

Laura, a successful executive in the telecommunications industry, was a prime candidate for executive coaching. She recently experienced a spike in her anxiety level, displaying obsessional long work hours, difficulty rising above challenges to meet business objectives, emotional outbursts, and bullying behavior toward her direct reports. She was unaware of the debilitating affect her actions had on her co-workers.

The executive coaching work Laura participated in provided her with specific concrete ways to tweak her leadership effectiveness and to transform her mindset from seeing challenges as problems and threats. Coaching enabled her to focus on seeing challenges as opportunities and identifying self-perceived problems as paths toward mental and behavioral self-development.

During the 6-month coaching period, Laura was given mental toughness psychometric assessments to measure her self-growth and development. Laura learned to recognize that whenever she confronts a challenge or overcomes a difficulty in her personal or professional life, it's important to draw on those deep strengths residing inside her that make all the difference. She learned that her success comes down to one fundamental quality – mental toughness.

Laura succeeded in achieving her executive coaching goals of honing in on her leadership skills. Once she experienced a heightened sense of self-awareness, it expanded her ability to reframe problems as opportunities, subsequently helping her improve her ability to see things through multiple lenses. Laura now embraces new leadership challenges and opportunities for growth in managing her relationships, and navigating the dynamics of her company's environment.

The Integrated Approach to Developing Mental Toughness Through Coaching

Mental Toughness coaching helps existing and emerging leaders to identify, and overcome, their limiting beliefs, self-imposed fears, unaddressed behavior patterns, and interpersonal difficulties.

Similarly, executive coaching helps clients develop essential skill sets to manage relationships through social awareness, to communicate more effectively, and develop sound strategic and action plans for success.

The synergy of executive coaching and developing mental toughness through coaching is compelling. By applying an integrated approach of executive coaching and developing mental toughness through coaching, we help our clients develop into more self-aware and emotionally intelligent leaders, improving work performance and positive behavior in others.

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Methods for Achieving Mental Toughness in Business

Now that you know the benefits of having mental toughness in business, what is the pathway to increasing your own? As the case profile on the last page indicates, one option is obtaining professional guidance. Mental performance coaching, similar to traditional executive coaching, asserts that everyone has an optimum mental zone with certain levels of optimism -- where an individual feels invigorated and intentional, rather than stressed and reactive. It aims to enable executives to create the zone for their most important challenges, such as confrontations, negotiations, and defining moments of leadership. Alan Crain, SVP and chief legal and governance officer for Baker Hughes, says: "I describe it as relaxed, yet focused. You're calm but enthusiastic, energized without being nervous. Everything is controlled, interesting and positive."^x

While this alternative is certainly useful to some, it does represent a time commitment. Depending on your schedule, you may not have the flexibility to devote the necessary hours. Fortunately, we have devised a list of strategies you can undertake at your convenience to train yourself in mental toughness. They will give you the ability to withstand the unexpected and diverse challenges of business, as well as to whether the personal and professional disappointments often encountered when working in a stressful environment. The strategies are presented below.

Ten Success Strategies for Mental Toughness in Business

1. **Control your emotional response to all challenges.** At the first sign of pressure, immediately stop, take a few deep breaths, and be still in both mind and action. Then ask yourself, "Am I allowing events or circumstances to control my emotional response?" With a strong, disciplined mind, you become self-directed and self-reliant. Self-manage your thinking and emotions and make your own decisions rather than being controlled by the business environment, the opinion of others, or momentary situations.
2. **Be self-disciplined.** Companies like Google, YouTube, Amazon, and eBay did not spin out from big companies. They sprang from individuals who were self-motivated, remained disciplined in their dedication to innovation, and had an inquisitive mind. This deep strength means you are your own person responsible for your own success or failure. Self-discipline means responding moment by moment to what you are thinking rather than feeling. In a world of choices and potential influences, we can often forget to remain grounded by thinking first to 'look within ourselves'. But doing so summons the inner strengths necessary to cope with the demands of life as they arise. Self-discipline depends on what you expect from yourself. Self-expectation enables you to direct your mind to function at a higher level. A higher expectation promotes improved self-esteem, higher self-worth, and transforms desires into action. Conversely, low expectations foster compromises and poor self-image and tells your mind to function at a low capacity.
3. **Be Consistent in who you are.** Mentally strong people know that the challenge in business is to have consistency in 'who you are', from personal branding and authenticity, to following your gut. What makes this so challenging is that no one else can tell you who you really are. We have many assumptions of who we are and who we want to be as we are constantly evolving, negotiating how we want others to see us. By summoning such mental strengths as persistence, resilience, and emotional intelligence, we can identify and manage emotions in a positive way. The more you like yourself, know your core strengths, understand the values that are important to you, know how your moral compass drives you toward

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success and what influences your failures, you'll have a more accurate perception of the real "you" that is constantly evolving.

4. **Hear the words of Shunryu Suzuki: "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few."** There's a trap that many smart, ambitious professionals fall into as their careers move forward. It's seldom discussed yet can turn a productive and fulfilling career into a mediocre one. And ironically, the more experienced you become, the greater your chances of getting derailed by it. The trap is to become an expert. In business being an expert is considered a mark of distinction, a title that promises consistent and thoughtful excellence. But the truth is many experts establish a routine that has worked for them early in their careers and then never deviate from it. They become ingrained in seeing things and doing things a certain way and stop considering any other way. They effectively switch off the probing, creative minds that launched their careers and instead operate on autopilot. Don't let this happen to you. It blinds you from the nuanced details of each new challenge and from creating the very best solutions possible.
5. **Be flexible.** Flexibility is a learned mental skill. In today's dynamic world, your effectiveness as a professional depends on your *readiness to adjust* quickly to the moments of need or opportunity, adversity, and change. Instead of being a rigid thinker of staying with what you feel comfortable with and what has worked in the past, you can approach these uncertainties by thinking more creatively and being flexible in your thinking. Be aggressively curious, ask questions, and be open to alternatives.
6. **Be inner-directed.** Inner-directed leaders decide what to think and how to respond *constructively*, rather than having their thoughts and emotions influenced and controlled by the business environment, the opinion of others or a situation that is only momentary. While emotions overwhelmingly drive behavior for many, **inner-directed leaders** understand that emotion and logic are intertwined and know how to balance both in everyday situations.
7. **Self-awareness is a mindset to finding your best self.** The more you like yourself, know your core strengths, understand the values that are important to you, know how your moral compass drives you toward success and what influences your failures, the more accurate perception you possess of the real "you" and your abilities.
8. **Don't dismiss feelings of uncertainty.** Uncertainty offers you a chance to step back to reassess numerous possibilities. Never assume there is only one outcome for any problem. Prepare for multiple outcomes regardless of what is expected, be aggressively inquisitive by asking questions, and see uncertainty as an opportunity that offers you a different perspective. See things through multiple lenses rather than a limiting single lens. Take the offensive approach by being inner-directed, not allowing the uncertainty of the situation to dictate your thinking or control your emotions. Think through your decisions and then act on them, but not as a knee-jerk response to fears, the opinions of colleagues, the business environment or momentary situations.
9. **View adversity as a precursor to positive change.** This is an empowering statement because the exact moment you say it out loud, you've taken charge of how you want the situation to unfold rather than becoming its victim by giving it permission to take charge of your emotions and thoughts. Looking around your home life and work environment, you'll find numerous reasons why you can overcome adversity. Notice how your performance at work becomes more effective and focused despite the adversity. So stop

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wasting time whining and allowing the adversity to influence your mental state! As a mentally strong leader, you expect adversity, so respond to it as a precursor to positive change, as learning something new, a chance to see obstacles as open opportunities to new possibilities.

10. **Adversity is a strength disguised as a 'life skill'**. When confronted by adversity, you'll do one of two things. Either you'll disengage from it, not acknowledging its current and future affect, or you'll view it as a "life skill", a survival mechanism in improving motivation in response to certain situations. Adversity becomes an opportunity for positive change, helping you work through difficult situations in pursuit of your purpose. Mentally strong leaders know that every situational adversity makes you more resilient. Use adversity as a springboard that inspires resilient thinking because it is your thinking in a resilient fashion that determines the action influencing your final result.

Conclusion: Make Mental Toughness a Priority

As we have hopefully shown with this paper, mental toughness is something one should strive for in life. It is a more accurate predictor of success than talent or intelligence, which makes it a useful quality in obtaining one's personal and professional goals. It has special utility in the business world, a high-pressure environment that requires a unique mindset in order to thrive. Fortunately, there are a number of strategies that can be used by executives to increase their toughness levels to meet their everyday challenges. Ultimately, the key aspect of mental toughness is that you do not have to be born with it -- it can be attained by anyone through practice and discipline. Because it is so beneficial, and because it is within anyone's reach, it is in your best interest to make achieving it a priority for yourself, and for others within your organization.

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