

Army Center for Enhanced Performance: A Commander's Resource to Developing Consistent Peak Performance

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Thousands were watching in the stands. The Titans were trailing by two points on the opponent's 30-yard line. They had 10 seconds left to come back and win the playoff game. The kicker ran onto the field. The game was on the line, and the weight of winning was now on his shoulders. He made this kick 32 times already this season, but now he had the stress of the circumstances.

Sports psychologists make a profession out of training athletes for moments just like this. The ability to manage stress effectively so that it minimally impairs performance is an essential skill for any athlete. The U.S. Army realizes that this skill is not exclusively important to athletes. Soldiers patrol the streets and mountains of Afghanistan daily with the expectation that when their life is on the line their brothers and sisters around them will perform at their best. I have deployed, and I have seen and heard of many instances where this is not always the case. This is by no means a fault of the Soldiers. On the contrary, the struggle of mental fitness is a reality to all, and the Army is desperately trying to understand how to influence it.

Army Center for Enhanced Performance (ACEP)

The Army created the Center for Enhanced Performance (CEP) in the early '90s with a mission of accomplishing just that — understanding mental fitness and how they can develop it across the force. It has evolved and improved over the years and is now part of the Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness (CSF2) program. The mission remains unchanged. ACEP incorporates decades of scientific research conducted within the sport and performance psychology fields and employs specialists to coach, teach, and mentor units and leaders on how to improve mental toughness into their already existing training plans.¹ ACEP is an outstanding resource, which provides the necessary educational model, delivery method, and results needed to transform a tactical commander's approach to mental fitness.

As I prepare for company-level command, I have reflected on my experiences as an Infantry platoon leader for three years. I experienced the entire Army Force Generation (ARFORGEN) process through the progression from individual tasks to collective tasks all the way to a deployment. The training we conducted prior to the deployment undoubtedly made us physically, technically, and tactically strong. Rarely while deployed were we ever underprepared in those respects; however, there were surprises when it came to our mental strength. It was common for one or two individuals at a time to waver under the stresses of life, a career, or combat. We did not patrol and conduct missions at peak performance every day like we expected. I understand that to expect this is slightly idealistic; on the other hand, I believe I should have exposed my platoon to more training covering the aspects of mental toughness and how it contributes to one's overall performance. ACEP is an asset that would have provided the mental skills training we needed.

I was first exposed to CEP as a cadet at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y. I was on a team for a number of years that trained and prepared for the annual Sandhurst Competition. More than 50 teams competed over the course of two days on a wide variety of military and team-building assessments. We trained almost every day for that competition. As you can imagine, the event inflicted great amounts of stress. Each member of the team relied on the others to perform at their very best.

After placing second one year, we heard that the first place team had solicited help from CEP. This, of course, encouraged us to work with them the following year. I was immediately impressed. The CEP specialists were professional and worked with us to design an individualized plan that met our needs and molded into our training regimen.

I sought them out early on as a platoon leader after learning of their presence at my post. They were just as notable as I had remembered, and they helped us significantly during the months of individual task training. Unfortunately, as we progressed further into collective training in the subsequent year, I failed to incorporate them further to reinforce the concepts they stressed. I have come to believe this was one of the main reasons why our mental strength was one of our weaknesses during the deployment.

Tools to be Leveraged

The foundation of ACEP is its education model (see [Figure 1](#)). It is scientifically based and provides a guide for commanders and performance specialists to train Soldiers on the different aspects contributing to one's mental strength. It begins with an overview of the foundations of mental skills and proceeds with five interconnected skills that together contribute to mental strength. These skills are: building confidence, goal setting, attention control, energy management, and integrating imagery.² Education is geared at identifying and developing optimal human performance.



Figure 1 – ACEP Education Model

The mental skills foundation provides an appreciation for how the mental and emotional domains affect performance. ACEP specialists draw on the similarities between the widely accepted practice of sports psychology and the psychological needs of their unit.³ Building confidence “create(s) energy, optimism, and enthusiasm and help(s) manage internal obstacles that hinder performance excellence.”⁴ Soldiers with high self-efficacy are able to define success in a way that improves their overall performance; self-talk is one of the key tools that ACEP introduces to achieve this. Self-talk is that inner voice that is either building us up or tearing us down in stressful circumstances. It is a choice, and performers take advantage of it.

The importance of goal setting is understandable; however, few individuals take the time to completely develop their goals and dissect the nested tasks required to achieve them. Often, people struggle with remaining motivated to meet those goals as well. ACEP lays out specific methods for doing this; in addition, they aid in producing approaches to monitor progress.

Retaining attention is a struggle for everyone. ACEP teaches the skills necessary to identify the most important priority demanding our time and the tools required to focus our attention on it. One of these tools is cue words. Cue words are words or phrases that are repetitively trained to put us back in the moment — to refocus our attention. Attention control also plays a large role in one's mental agility,

which is something that all Soldiers should be working to develop.⁵ Every stress elicits some type of physiological response from our bodies. ACEP's principle of energy management provides a background on how to recognize and regulate this response to maximize energy when it is most needed. Controlled breathing is the most used technique to accomplish this.

The last and most widely underestimated skill is integrating imagery, also known as visualization. An ACEP specialist once told me that 10 visualized rehearsals equated to one full-dress rehearsal. The Army has long recognized this principle. Visualization techniques have been incorporated at every level of training where resources are scarce; the Engagement Skills Trainer for marksmanship and the Virtual Combat Convoy Trainer are digital examples.⁶

ACEP's expertise is just as vast at the collective levels. ACEP specialists are knowledgeable on the theories of motivation and can apply them in relation to personality types and team dynamics. They can assist units with developing detailed goals and clearly defining member roles. They also provide counsel on how to best capitalize on Soldiers' strengths and mitigate their weaknesses for the betterment of the unit.⁷ These are practical descriptions which become complex because of the distinctive nature of every team and unit.

The ACEP education model, paired with its delivery method, provides a training resource that is difficult to match. It has a three-step delivery: education, acquisition, and application (see [Figure 2](#)). This mimics the Army's crawl, walk, and run method. The most appreciated aspect of delivery is that it is uniquely tailored to the specific unit's needs they are working with. The education phase provides an understanding and appreciation for the mental skills. The acquisition phase incorporates hands-on activities that reinforce what was learned; examples of this include the use of bio-feedback technology to demonstrate energy management or imagery scripts specific to an event that is familiar to the unit. The last phase is the application phase; this is where Soldiers and units apply the concepts of mental skills training in an environment outside of ACEP.⁸ This can be accomplished in many ways, but often it includes ACEP representatives present at a unit range or training event providing support and feedback.

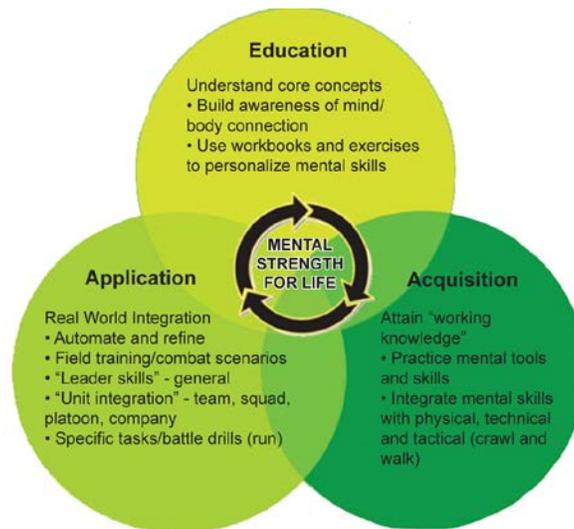


Figure 2 – ACEP Delivery Method

My Experience

Early on as a platoon leader, this is exactly the process I arranged with ACEP specialists. Our brigade was in the reset phase of the ARFORGEN cycle, and my platoon was beginning to progress through individual tasks. Initially, my consultation focused on improving my platoon's marksmanship skills and Army

Physical Fitness Test (APFT) scores. As our relationship with ACEP strengthened, a secondary goal of team building emerged. We agreed this focus was ideal for maximizing my Soldiers' potential during individual tasks, as well as setting us up for success as we progressed to team- and squad-level collective tasks. A breakdown of the lesson plan we produced is included as [Figure 3](#).

Outline of Mental Skills Training
1/B/1-38 IN — POC: 2LT Dibble

Education

First meeting: Focused on the individual (early December/company dayroom or battalion conference room)

Intro to ACEP and mental conditioning (2 x 90 minutes/each section at a time)

- 1) Outline goal and intent
- 2) Describe the history of its success (athletes, units, Soldiers, etc.)
- 3) Introduce mental skills training to include understanding the physiology of performance, thought performance interaction, and the methods to capitalize on those reactions

Second meeting: Focused on the leaders (mid-January/company dayroom)

Leaders brainstorm the use of mental skills training (2.5 hours/squad leaders and up)

- 1) Recap on first class
- 2) Review how to incorporate mental skills training into the culture of the platoon
- 3) Cover team development and the importance of setting goals, defining roles, identifying strengths and weaknesses, and finding sources of motivation

Application

Third meeting: Focused on the squads (mid-February/company dayroom)

Theories of motivation (2.5 hours/one squad at a time/conducted over many days)

- 1) Theories of motivation in relation to personality types and team dynamics; Soldiers will participate in exercises that will help them isolate their personality type and motivational style
- 2) Discuss squad's successes and failures at goal setting, defining roles, capitalizing on strengths and weaknesses, and motivating
- 3) Discuss the dynamics of introducing new people

Future training: Reinforcing team building/individual mental skills (training events)

- 1) Apply specific mental skills to specific activities (i.e. marksmanship, PT, battle drills)
- 2) Review the personal performance plan

Figure 3 – Example Outline of Mental Skills Training

We began, as recommended, with a block of instruction on the fundamentals of mental skills training. ACEP specialists came to our building and tailored their instruction to our environment; this really made it easier for me to sell to higher considering our lack of white space on the calendar. I also felt it made many of the Soldiers more comfortable. The specialists did an excellent job relying on the commonly accepted value of mental skills training to sports. They then applied it to us as Soldiers. This really drew the attention of many of the Soldiers who were initially reluctant to receive the training. After this, they progressed to teaching the physiology of our performance and how we can best regulate it to our favor; the performance education model was their framework. ACEP focused on the tangible actions my Soldiers could take to improve their performance during the upcoming rifle qualification range and APFT.

During our second meeting, I wanted to focus on my junior NCOs. I knew if they bought into the methods they could continue to reinforce them with their teams and squads in subsequent training

exercises. We ended up doing a round table, brainstorm-like session with ACEP specialists. By now, the Soldiers were becoming more familiar with the specialists and were very comfortable talking with them. After a quick recap and after action review (AAR) of the previous lesson, we began to proceed into team dynamics. We discussed team development and the importance of setting goals, defining roles, identifying individual strengths and weaknesses, and finding sources of motivation within the team. I facilitated the discussion with the support of ACEP. This was a step towards our next session, which was going to incorporate all of the Soldiers. The intent was to get the NCOs' buy-in and provide them the necessary time to prepare to have the same discussion with their Soldiers.

One of my NCOs actually worked with ACEP after this meeting and produced an imagery script for our upcoming rifle qualification. It was a recording of him providing systematic instructions on qualifying. ACEP even incorporated the sound effects of one of our other ranges. The product was a visualization tool that all of my Soldiers were able to use to rehearse and prepare.

The third session is where we transitioned to the application phase of ACEP's delivery method. Now that the Soldiers were familiar with many of the mental skills and had practically applied them at the individual level, we proceeded to palpably tying the mental skills to each of the squads uniquely. It was another round table where the squads openly debated what did and did not work when it came to the topics previously discussed with the NCOs. The squad leaders facilitated the discussion with ACEP there for guidance. Squads focused on identifying roles and motivation techniques to enable success in future collective training exercises.

From this point, our interaction with ACEP was at the range and in the training areas. Impressively, they were not afraid to get in the dirt right alongside of us. ACEP was present to enhance the physical, tactical, and technical training already being conducted. They participated in the AARs and provided consultation to any individuals or teams looking for it. To my surprise, many of the Soldiers and NCOs took advantage of their presence. It was not rare to see a Soldier privately visualizing a lane or a team discussing individual roles and responsibilities. I invited ACEP to every situational training exercise (STX) or live-fire exercise we had for the next couple of months. They were of tremendous value in these circumstances and proved to be very worthwhile to the platoon.

Concrete Results

The most striking aspect of using ACEP staff is their tangible results. The year I worked with CEP as a student on the Sandhurst team, my team finished first out of the approximately 40 U.S. teams that competed. As a platoon leader, I experienced similar results; I sought out ACEP specialists to provide a foundation for mental skills training and a framework for team development. Ultimately, I was seeking a successful completion of individual tasks and a preparation for team and squad collective tasks, and I found just that.

My two metrics for evaluating the influence of the training were APFT and rifle qualification scores. We had conducted both already prior to the mental skills training so I had a baseline understanding of where my platoon stood prior. On the day of both of the events, I remember walking around and talking to a number of my Soldiers. Surprisingly, many of them were discussing the techniques that they had learned from the ACEP specialists. I remember this because it was one of the few times I saw my Soldiers excited to take the APFT or qualify.

For the APFT, the platoon average jumped 22 points with no failures. This was significant considering the previous test was only six weeks prior and we had two failures. As for our rifle qualification, individual scores increased between 10 to 20 percent. We also had first-time goes across the entire platoon. This was a feat that no other platoon in the company accomplished (nor did we in our first range).

We also had the opportunity soon after these events to evaluate, or be evaluated on, our teamwork during our battalion's platoon competition. A seven-mile course tested our physical fitness, military knowledge, and teamwork. Sixteen platoons participated in all. We attempted to incorporate everything we had learned in our mental skills training, and we won.

The ACEP is a well-vetted asset that commanders would be negligent to ignore. We can no longer operate under the impression that mental strength is a by-product of the traditional methods of physical, tactical, and technical training. ACEP's education model and delivery method are attractive and tailored to meet the needs of every unit, and their results are undeniable. As budgets draw down and our resources for training diminish, units can no longer afford for individuals or teams to be mentally or emotionally distracted. Make-ups and redos are vestiges of the past. Of course, we must also take advantage of any resource that could contribute to our Soldiers' consistent peak performance while deployed.

Resources

For more information about performance enhancement resources, contact your local CSF2 program office. The following websites may also be of assistance:

- * www.lewis-mcchord.army.mil/csf2
- * www.drum.army.mil/FamilyServices/Pages/csf2.aspx
- * www.usma.edu/cep/sitepages/pep.aspx
- * <http://csf2.army.mil/training.html>

Notes

¹ Gregory A. Burbelo, "Army Center for Enhanced Performance Executive Summary," <http://acep.army.mil/pdf/Executive%20Summary%20ACEP%20vfinal.pdf>.

² Ibid, 3.

³ Ibid, 3.

⁴ "Performance Enhancement," Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness.

⁵ Ibid, 4.

⁶ Scott R. Gourley, "Training for the Ambush," *Military Training Technology Online* (2005): 1-5. Retrieved 22 March 2014 from <http://www.metavr.com>.

⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁸ Ibid, 5.

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