

## **Measuring the Building Blocks of Performance**

Robert M. Nideffer, Ph.D.

Once an individual has developed the knowledge base and technical skills required to be successful in a highly competitive job or sport, what is it that determines success or failure? The answer is simple, it's the ability to stay focused, to concentrate on task relevant cues. Nothing is more basic to performance, or more critical to success, than the ability to concentrate. The Attentional and Interpersonal Style (TAIS) inventory is a tool that measures basic concentration skills.

To be successful, people need to be able to shift their focus of concentration along two intersecting dimensions, width, and direction. When they can make those shifts in response to the changing demands of performance situations, they can "do it all." Figure 1 shows the four basic concentration styles people need to be able to shift between.

A broad external focus of concentration is the style used for awareness and sensitivity to surroundings. A master of the martial arts needs this focus to be ready to respond to an attack from any direction. A good salesperson uses this focus to be sensitive to a customer's reactions.

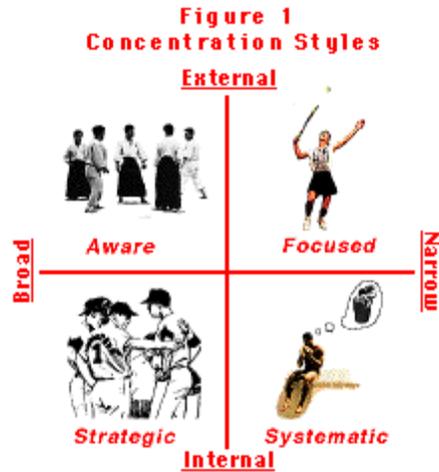
A broad internal focus of concentration is used to strategize and to creatively problem solve. A coach uses it to make adjustments in a game, a manager uses it to develop strategic goals and objectives for his division or for the company.

A narrow internal focus of concentration is used to create a logical set of systems and/or procedures. A diver uses this style of concentration to mentally rehearse his performance. Managers use it to create a set of rules or steps that lead to the accomplishment of a production goal or corporate objective.

A narrow external focus of concentration is used to execute, to get the job done. This is the type of concentration used to catch or hit a ball in sport. It's the kind of concentration a production line worker uses to drill a hole, or a writer uses to type a letter.

### **TAIS Measures A Person's Concentration Preferences**

Although everyone is capable of developing the four different styles of concentration shown in Figure 1, people's scores on TAIS indicate we each have preferred or more highly developed focus. Typically, these preferred styles of attending are associated with both our genetic makeup and our educational and occupational backgrounds. Most CEO's for example, are strategic or "big picture" thinkers. Scores on TAIS indicate that for CEO's and other top level executives, it's a broad internal focus of concentration that is most highly developed. In contrast, it is the ability to narrow one's focus to a single task or goal that is more developed in engineers and other highly skilled technically oriented individuals, including most world record.



Having a dominant or preferred style does not mean you can't shift your focus. Under conditions of optimal emotional arousal, most people perform effectively, and have no problems shifting between the four different styles of concentration when required to do so. When emotional arousal drops too low or goes too high, however, individuals fail to make adjustments in their focus of concentration, becoming dominated by their preferred style, and performance errors occur. Figure 2 shows the different types of concentration errors people make.

### **TAIS Allows Us to Predict A Person's Concentration Errors**

When arousal levels drop too low, people's minds begin to wander. Those who are dominated by a broad-external focus of concentration become distracted by things going on in their environment. Those dominated by a broad-internal focus of concentration have a tendency to become overloaded and distracted by their own thoughts.

The sales person whose strength is his external awareness, but isn't really into the sale, pays more attention to people walking by than to the client, and because of that loses the sale. The master of the martial arts relaxes too much and allows himself to become distracted by one of his opponents losing his awareness of the attacker. The coach or manager known for his strategic skills and abilities over-analyzes and becomes too creative in his thinking. Instead of providing a clear set of instructions for others to follow, he overloads them with information and paralyzes them.

If the mistakes individuals make when they become a little too relaxed occur within an important situation, those mistakes cause an immediate increase in the individual's level of emotional arousal. That increase in arousal causes biochemical changes which narrow the focus of concentration. Narrowing is a natural part of the body's "fight or flight" response. The individual uses the narrow focus to immediately assess the situation to determine how much damage has been done.

Whether a person will recover and re-focus on the task, depends upon his level of self-

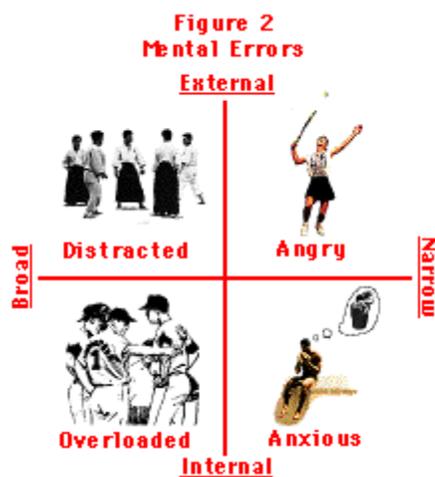
confidence following the assessment. When confident, arousal settles into the optimal range. The person is able to mentally let the mistake go and re-focus concentration on accomplishing the task. When confidence is lacking, however, arousal levels increase even more and the person begins to develop feelings of anger and frustration, or of anxiety and doubt.

TAIS scores allow us to predict who is more likely to become bored and distracted by things going on in the environment, and who is more likely to become distracted and overloaded by their own thoughts. TAIS scores also allow us to predict who will lose control over feelings of frustration and anger and who will lose control over feelings of anxiety and self-doubt.

### **TAIS Allows Us To Predict Performance Under Pressure**

Whether or not a person will react to mistakes by becoming frustrated and angry or by becoming worried and anxious depends on how they score on TAIS scales measuring the need for control, competitiveness, level of self-esteem, and speed of decision making. Individuals who have higher levels of self-esteem, are more competitive, have a greater desire to be in control, and make decisions more quickly than the average person react to mistakes with anger and frustration. Their focus of concentration narrows and they begin to try and force the issue. Whether they can use the anger successfully depends in large part on the situation. Often, they cannot.

The tennis player shown in Figure 2 tightens up and tries to hit the serve harder than she is capable of. She ducks her head, rushes her swing and hits the ball into the net. A salesperson becomes too intense and is perceived as too aggressive by the client, pushing too hard, and not listening. The narrow external focus keeps both the tennis player and the salesperson from monitoring their own behavior and from making the adjustments they need to make to be successful.



Individuals who make decisions more slowly, and are below average in competitiveness,

the need for control, and level of self-esteem, react to pressure and mistakes with worry and self-doubt. When their concentration narrows it becomes focused internally, on negative thoughts and feelings. The diver shown in Figure 2 begins thinking about possible mistakes instead of systematically rehearsing performance. Managers with this pattern of scores on TAIS start to worry about mistakes or about how they are being perceived by others. An internal focus keeps them from being aware of critical things going on around them and interferes with timely decisions.

Whether the emotional reaction is one of anger and frustration, or one of worry and doubt, the narrowing of attention, and the break down in shifting from an external focus to an internal one, or vice versa, results in decisions being made with only half of the relevant data being considered. Just how destructive that breakdown in concentration will be depends upon the complexity of the task (how much information is missed), and on how important the situation is. Was it match point at Wimbledon or just a recreational tennis match? Did the manager's worry keep him from hearing the same old complaint he's already heard a dozen times, or did it keep him from reacting quickly enough to a major problem on a production line?

### **TAIS Allows Us To Anticipate Problem Areas**

Scores on TAIS scales can also be used to identify the performance conditions most likely to lead to success or failure for a person.

How high or low a person scores on any of the attentional and interpersonal building blocks measured by TAIS provides an indication of the individual's level of comfort and confidence, as well as their behavioral flexibility, in performance situations requiring the behavior.

A manager with a very high need for control, for example, will find it difficult to give up control and to effectively delegate when he is under pressure. It is more stressful to give up control than it is to try and do everyone else's job. Contrast this with the behavior of a manager who scores much lower on the TAIS scale measuring need for control.

A low scoring manager will be stressed when pressure forces him to become more authoritative and less democratic in his management style. Under these conditions he is likely to fail because he doesn't confront issues quickly enough and fails to provide needed structure.

This same logic applies to the other interpersonal characteristics measured by TAIS. People who make decisions quickly are stressed when they have to wait. People who are introverted are more likely to become stressed when they have to initiate contact with others. Individuals who are highly verbal are stressed in situations where they have to remain silent.

### **All TAIS Scales Are Directly Related to Performance**

What makes TAIS so useful is the fact that the concentration skills and interpersonal abilities the inventory measures have an obvious and very direct link to virtually all performance situations. It is this, combined with the fact preferred concentration and interpersonal styles become very trait like under pressure, that makes TAIS a valuable tool when working with individuals who must perform at very high levels and those who must perform under a lot of pressure.

The fact that each of the characteristics measured by TAIS has some relevance to almost every performance situation makes it possible to develop mission or performance specific profiles. These profiles can be created statistically by testing a group of high performers within a particular area and then using their means scores to graph a profile. The profiles can also be created by identifying "exemplar" performers or models, and using their scores on TAIS as a metric. Finally, mission profiles can be developed conceptually, by using the input of experts to behaviorally define the performance requirements in terms of scores on TAIS.

### **Mission or Job Specific TAIS Profiles**

The ability to create mission or job specific profiles is critical because the concentration skills and interpersonal abilities required by different jobs can't be adequately captured by comparing an individual's scores on TAIS to those of some normative population. The keys to success for two individuals with the same job title, even within the same organization, can be dramatically different. The organizational climate, the behaviors and attitudes of subordinates, peers, and superiors all help to determine the concentration and interpersonal skills required for success in a given job. A normative group, who's job is similar to that of an applicant, may provide a general template that can be used as a starting point for developing a mission or job specific profile, but that's all it does.

Obviously, the development of job or mission specific profiles requires considerable knowledge about the organization and about the people that the person being considered, will interact with. When organizations make good selection decisions, it is because the people making those decisions are able to use the knowledge they have about others in the organization, in addition to the knowledge they have about the individual, to help them in the decision making process. In effect, they create mission or job specific profiles in their head. TAIS, more than any other instrument can help make this process more objective, and more reliable.

TAIS differs from other instruments in two distinct ways. 1) The characteristics measured have direct relevance to performance and are much more easily translated into job specific behaviors. 2) There is a broad enough range of performance relevant characteristics measured to allow for subtle but critical differentiations between mission or job profiles.

Using TAIS to develop job specific profiles forces those who are hiring, to behaviorally define the characteristics they believe are critical to success. When individual's profiles don't match the ideal, it leads to very specific, and testable predictions, about the kinds of

problems that are likely to occur. Using other sources of information (e.g., the interview process and past history) to examine the accuracy of those predictions greatly enhances the likelihood of hiring the right person.

Comparing an individual's TAIS profile to the mission profile also leads to an identification of those specific behaviors that need to be modified and/or developed to enhance performance and/or to raise it to acceptable levels. It is this that makes TAIS such a valuable tool for training and for performance enhancement.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

There are certain concentration skills and interpersonal characteristics that are important contributors to performance in almost every situation. A convenient way to think of these characteristics is as the "building blocks of performance." The Attentional and Interpersonal Style (TAIS) inventory, measures these building blocks of performance.

As a result of biological factors, genetics, and learning experiences, some of the building blocks measured by TAIS become more highly developed or trait like than others. Each of us develops a slightly different pattern of scores. Those characteristics in us, that are more highly developed, become more trait like when our emotional arousal level gets outside the optimal range. With increasing arousal, we lose our ability to adapt our some of our trait like behaviors to changes in the performance situation. We become controlled by our dominant characteristics.

There is no perfect, or ideal pattern of scores on TAIS. What ever the pattern of scores, that pattern will contribute to success in some situations, and lead to failure in others. The challenge we all face is to:

#### **Select performance arenas that play to our strengths or dominant patterns.**

Enhance performance by gaining greater control over emotions and our focus of concentration to keep our more dominant building blocks from controlling us. That is what Attention Control Training (ACT) is all about.

Team build, by establishing relationships with people we trust, people who have characteristics that are complimentary to our own.

TAIS, more than any other inventory available today, provides the information needed for selection, performance enhancement, and for team building, in situations where people must perform at extremely high levels, and/or when individuals are under a great deal of pressure to perform.