

FAST COMPANY

Can You Perform Under Pressure?

It's the ultimate test in business. Robert Nideffer, whose clients include Olympic athletes and the Navy Seals, shows you how to pass.

From: [Issue 11](#) | October/November 1997 | Page 54 **By:** Kate Kane **Illustrations by:** Robert Zimmerman

Question: What do the navy Seals, the U.S. Ski Team, and the Tucson Police Department have in common? Answer: more than you might think. Every day, members of these organizations make critical decisions under pressure with less information than they'd like. And ultimately, not everyone makes the grade. Which is why all three organizations have turned to the same expert to help select people who can handle the strain, help coach people who can't, and otherwise improve personal and group performance.

Robert Nideffer, 55, is CEO of Enhanced Performance Systems in San Diego. He rose to prominence as a sports psychologist two decades ago after his book, *The Inner Athlete*, became a sensation.

These days, more and more of Nideffer's clients are companies struggling to master the new realities of business competition. But whether the playing field is sports or business, his diagnostic tool is the same: a 144-item questionnaire called The Attentional and Interpersonal Style (TAIS) inventory. There are no right or wrong answers on TAIS. But the logic of the test incorporates Nideffer's worldview: the difference between who wins and who loses has less to do with technical skills than with mental toughness. It's about how well people can focus their minds and manage their emotions under stress.

Nideffer is not shy about his claims for the test. "With the information from TAIS and a one-hour interview," he says, "I can tell you more about the conditions under which your people will succeed or fail than you'd know by working with them on a daily basis for a year." Lots of companies, including Nabisco, Harley-Davidson, and Citibank, seem to agree. They've all used TAIS as part of their selection and training processes.

We asked Nideffer to advise Fast Company readers on performing under pressure -- to identify the new rules that separate winners from losers.

Rule #1: There is no second place.

When the best sprinters in the world lined up to run the 100-meter dash in the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, each had the physical, technical, and tactical skills needed to win a gold medal. They had spent four years preparing for a race that would last 10 seconds. They understood the tremendous emotional and economic differences between first and second place. In situations where there are no clear technical advantages and where everyone is motivated, psychological factors -- like the ability to concentrate and control your emotions -- determine who wins. Is business all that different from sports? As business becomes more complex, you have to take bigger risks to win. And the consequences of failure are more severe than ever. That means individual performance is more visible than ever. There's no substitute for putting the right people in the right positions at the right time.

Rule #2: Competition takes concentration.

People who perform well in pressure situations have very specific concentration skills. Not every situation requires the same form of concentration. Engineering jobs require focus and follow-through rather than big-picture concentration.

Or let's say you're in sales, making the pitch of your career. The company's future is riding on whether you close this deal. You've done your homework. You're ready. But the moment you walk into the room, you feel tremendous pressure. Most people in that situation are so into their own head that they can't read the audience. Or they are hypersensitive to negative clues. People who can cope are people who can concentrate objectively on their surroundings.

Rule #3: Attitude matters.

In addition to the ability to concentrate, TAIS measures personality. It probes for self-esteem, confidence, street sense, distractibility. It also examines people's ability to express frustration and to challenge colleagues, and whether they are prepared to sacrifice other areas of life for a single accomplishment.

Here again, performing well in different jobs requires different personal characteristics. Salespeople, for example, score very high in four areas: willingness to take responsibility, need for control, self-confidence, intellectual expression. By these measures, the average salesperson is more competitive than 85% of the population.

Rule #4: Never wait to communicate.

This is one way business is different from sports. Even in a team sport like baseball, players often perform as individuals. I step up to the plate and I've got to get a hit. In business, even senior executives aren't free to act with total independence. Sure, they need concentration skills to select one project over another, to decide whether to hire a certain person. But then they have to convince other people that they made the right decision. That's where personal style becomes important. To perform, you have to be able

to communicate.

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