

The Visualization of Victory

Visualization, or mental simulation, is not a new concept. We all have fantasized and acted out our "life scripts"— virtual reality shows or magnificent epic movies—at some point in our lives. I have been experiencing and researching many different examples of high performance visualization since my early years as a Navy pilot in the 1950s; later with NASA astronauts in the 1960s and then up close and personal as chairman of psychology on the U. S. Olympic Committee's Sports Medicine Council during the 1980s.

Olympians train up to 1,200 days for a few moments of competition. Astronauts simulate until the profoundly unknown is perfectly known, the strangely unfamiliar becomes intimately familiar. According to Michael Phelps, the most decorated Olympian of all-time, his success stems from first visualizing each race before he even steps into the pool. Phelps says he's been visualizing since he was 7 years' old, watching what he calls his video of the perfect swim in his mind each night before going to sleep, mentally mapping out his ideal swim for the next day. Renowned Olympic gold medalist and World Cup skiing champion, Lindsey Vonn says her mental practice gives her a competitive advantage on the course. She says, "I always visualize the run before I do it. By the time I get to the start gate, I've skied that race 100 times already in my head, picturing how I'll take the turns." Not only does Lindsey pre-play visual images in her mind, she also simulates the path by shifting her weight back and forth as if she were on her skis, while practicing the specific breathing patterns she'll use during the race.

When asked about athletic skills versus mental skills, Michael Jordan, one of the greatest NBA basketball players of all time, said: "The mental part is the hardest part, and I think that's the part that separates the good players from the great players." In using mental imagery, Jordan said, "I visualized where I wanted to be, what kind of player I wanted to become. I knew exactly where I wanted to go, and I focused on getting there. And, one of my favorite Hall of Famers to be, NFL legendary quarterback Peyton Manning put it simply this way: "Some guys need to see things on a grease board ... I like when you can see it in your mind!"

In every sport, visualization is in the spotlight, whether it is legendary golfer Jack Nicklaus discussing "going to the movies" in his mind, pre-playing each shot before striking the golf ball, or Carli Lloyd, member of the 2015 US women's world cup soccer championship team, and the first player to ever score 3 goals in a World Cup final, reflecting how she takes time before each game to visualize positive scenarios between herself and the soccer ball.

Visualization is not reserved for pilots, astronauts and athletes only. Sales executives, scientists, surgeons, Navy seals, dancers, musicians, actors, parents, teachers and students do it every day. Visualization can also be used to improve health and well-being. During the past decade the techniques involved in visual imagery and mental rehearsal have grown from the oversimplified concepts of positive thinking to more scientific approaches that incorporate high-speed cinematography, digitized computer readouts and stop-action video replay, neuro-feedback techniques and simulation technology. Certain kinds of music, colors, images, and sensory environments can evoke different brain wave and emotional responses. Virtual reality technology, which many people associate with video games, has many beneficial applications.

Visualization works because the mind reacts automatically to the information we feed it in the form of words, pictures and emotions. And, as we have discussed, the brain's neural pathways can be reshaped and redirected. Basically there are two types of visualization, receptive and programmed. Receptive visualization is used to help answer a question or find a solution to a problem. In this type of visualization the question is formulated or the problem posed. First the issue is analyzed logically for better understanding; then a mental picture of a blank screen is formed, and the answer or solution is allowed to appear on the screen in its own time. This technique is especially helpful in recalling information that appears to have been forgotten or lost.

Programmed visualization is used to get what we want in life. We picture what we want repeatedly and the brain sends signals to the body that cause us to take action to bring about the desired results. Make sure you really want what you are visualizing; *never* picture a condition or event you don't want to occur.

Here are some specific tips for visualizing successfully:

1. When you visualize yourself doing something, make it an action scene in which there's movement. In sports psychology, this is referred to as VMBR Visual Motor Behavior Rehearsal, and the object is to create a neurological pathway enabling your muscles to "remember" the sequence of movements that make up an action. Therefore, no still pictures please.
2. Visualize both the successful outcome and the steps leading up to it. Olympic athletes mentally run through what they want to do and how they want to do it well before they arrive at the arena. They imagine the sights, sounds,

temperatures, spectators, and the other competitors--and then they focus on their own performances. Some even include a clock or stopwatch in their imagery to ensure that the timing and pacing in their minds are exact. To your brain, a dress rehearsal is the opening night performance.

3. Visualize conditions and things that are consistent with your principles and moral values. If there's a conflict, you'll be less likely to get your mind and body working in concert.
4. Most importantly, when you visualize yourself, see yourself in the present, as if you are already accomplishing your goal. Make certain your visual image is as you would see it through your own eyes, not watching through the eyes of a spectator. If you're a skier, your imagery would appear in your mind as if an invisible TV camera were mounted on your shoulder looking exactly where your eyes are focused during a ski run, and feeling the same sensations. If you need to give a speech, you should imagine exactly how the audience will look sitting in front of you.

To strengthen your visualization capability, start making mental notes about all the experiences that make up your life. Take in as many sights, sounds, smells, textures, and tastes as you can. Recreate in your mind the beauty of a sunrise or sunset. Feel the wet sand of a beach between your toes. As you become more curious, observant, and in tune with your surroundings, you'll find your powers of visualization improving greatly.

The more often you see the winner's circle in your mind's eye, the sooner you'll arrive there in person. Be more curious about everything around you. Use visual

images more in your everyday conversation. As you listen to someone talk, try to form a mental image of the situation he or she describes. Allow the words to form images, feelings and sensations. By linking feelings and images, you will be able to recall both better.

When you talk to others, use words that are rich in visual imagery; word pictures, analogies, stories, metaphors and similes create vivid mental pictures. You will

enjoy a side benefit of becoming a better conversationalist and public speaker if you do.