Are you mentally tough?
applying sports and navy principles to healthcare

. . . . so - are you tough enough?

Cranfield Healthcare Management Group
Research Briefing 16

How do they manage?

a study of the realities of middle and front line management work in healthcare

Ciara Moore November 2011
The term ‘mental toughness’ is widely used in sports and the navy. It can be argued that this is a quality that now applies in healthcare, particularly with respect to meeting ‘the Nicholson challenge’ of cutting the annual budget of the service by £20 billion by 2014/15. So what is mental toughness, and how can we use these techniques in the NHS.

**Mental toughness means having the natural or developed psychological edge that enables you to cope with your opponents, deal with many demands simultaneously, and specifically to be more consistent and better than your opponents.**

Tim Brabants is an A&E consultant by profession, but he is better known for his Olympic successes as a sprint kayaker. He speaks publicly about what it is like to be an athlete, and the similarities between sport and working in the NHS. He suggests that the principles of being an athlete can be transferred to the NHS, and vice versa.

**. . . . being an athlete . . . . working in healthcare . . . . same principles . . . .**

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<th>passionate about success</th>
<th>goal oriented</th>
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<td>teamwork</td>
<td>focussed</td>
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<td>motivated</td>
<td>committed</td>
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<td>timelines</td>
<td>results-driven</td>
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<td>continuous process</td>
<td>reflection</td>
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<td>psychology</td>
<td>embracing change . . . and everything else</td>
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‘In sport, mental toughness is what keeps you going when things get tough. I can see parallels in my clinical work - the ability to keep going when faced with a difficult challenge. For example, a big polyp which is bleeding after half a resection. It would be easy to give up and send for surgery, but persistence despite high pressure and resultant anxiety - as long as you know it is the right thing to do, requires mental toughness. In management, you need the same qualities, perhaps when trying to force through change that you know is important when there is significant resistance’.

(gastroenterology consultant)

One time military officer Rick Seaman, now chief executive of Strategy Implementation Inc, describes his naval officer training as ‘learning the Navy’s philosophy of no escape, no clauses, no exceptions, no waivers, special favours or accommodation for the many hurdles and obstacles between a trainee and his goal of graduation’. The naval academy is run to systematically weed out those who do not meet the strict requirements of becoming a naval officer. The goal is to instil drive, commitment and the self discipline needed to succeed. This is achieved through a combination of inspiration and stress techniques. New recruits are informed about expected behaviours through pictures, stories and poems married with a tough physical regime in which non-compliance is punished with extreme physical exercise to the point of exhaustion. Recruits are expected never to make excuses, never guess, and never give up. To their superiors, they are allowed give only five answers: Yes sir, No sir, Aye-aye sir, I’ll find out sir, and No excuse sir’. Performance measurement is a religion.
The US Navy Principles for Mental Toughness are:

1. Excellence in small, unimportant things leads to excellence in big important things
2. Don’t guess: know for sure, and if you don’t know, find out
3. Work hard on problems; if they persist, work harder; never give up
4. Endure pain and discomfort in order to succeed
5. Take pride in overcoming difficulties; the greater the difficulty, the greater the pride
6. The more effort you invest in a task, the less likely you are to abandon that investment and quit

These naval principles are perhaps extreme. However, they can be applied by managers in the NHS and have been evidenced by some of the managers in our research:

‘I try to remain true to the principles which brought me to work in the NHS initially, and use these as my benchmark in all I do. If I can be sure that the decisions I make are done with the best interests of patients, staff and the organization at heart, feel that I can defend them if necessary, even if in hindsight they are proven to be wrong. On this basis, I feel able to make difficult decisions and this is often what is required. Others in the team look to leaders to make decisions.’

(operations manager surgery)

Sporting strategies to improve your mental toughness

Sam Koutadia, managing director of Mindsports, suggests that there are seven pillars of mental toughness. We have reviewed these and have found that they can be applied to aid the mental toughness of NHS managers:

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<th>take criticism</th>
<th>In sport, there is nowhere to hide; every performance is on display</th>
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<td>Look at criticism objectively and learn from it, understanding that you are capable of more</td>
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<th>aim to do better</th>
<th>Athletes understand the small changes required to shave off the vital seconds they need to win; they exploit all avenues open to them whether through sports psychology or reflective practice</th>
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<td>NHS managers can benchmark against peers, but also need to understand their own needs: ‘How do I manage to get through the challenges - I suppose that is about having an understanding of my strengths and weakness and being able to ask for help’ (operations manager adult critical care)</td>
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<th>deal with setbacks</th>
<th>Even world class athletes have setbacks, and it is their reaction to these setbacks that determine their overall success</th>
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<td>Managers must find time to reflect and evaluate what has gone wrong: ‘I use reflection on the way home in the car. I also talk to a colleague - it is important to have a colleague you can go to for support’ (operations manager)</td>
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<th>willpower</th>
<th>Top athletes can be tempted by the spoils of celebrity status, and must often push themselves to the limit; mental toughness is demonstrated through those who value long term gratification</th>
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<td>Managers often do not see the results of their efforts on a daily basis; change takes time. However, understanding what you want and keeping a record of daily achievements can help to stay focussed</td>
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<th>recover from injuries</th>
<th>Steve Backley, Olympian javelin thrower, had career threatening injuries. Using visualization, he mentally rehearsed, daily, the physical act of throwing. This kept him sharp, and he went on to win gold in the commonwealth games.</th>
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<td>The media and continuous external assessment can leave managers and their teams feeling bruised. To remain focused managers should find time to reflect, refocus and evaluate their goals and aims to stay positive.</td>
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Athletes need to train to remain focused for long periods of time and keep their minds glued on the physical side.

Managers must not be distracted from their long-term goals by today’s firefighting: ‘I spent many years working clinically and managing theatres out of hours. This taught me to prioritize, and that no matter what was happening, the team could only deal with one emergency at a time. The decisions could be life and death, literally, so I try to keep in context what I am doing’

(operations manager surgery)

A mentally tough athlete is able to let go of failure, learn from it and move on.

‘If I feel criticism is justified, I try to make it into a positive experience. I try to get things back into perspective and look on tomorrow as being a new day’

(directorate support manager)

NHS managers may not face quite the same kind of ‘opponents’ as athletes and the navy. But ‘the Nicholson challenge’ presents a battle of a different kind. By using the techniques of top athletes, and principles from the navy, we can develop and improve the mental toughness to take the service through this challenge - and the future challenges to come.

*If you have a view on any of these issues, please let us know.*

**Key sources**

Bill Cole, Interview with Rick Seaman, CEO Strategy Implementation Inc: Mental Toughness

_The Navy Way_, How the U.S. Naval Academy teaches future military officers to be mentally tough

Oscar Castello, ‘Resilience’, Ezine@rticles, 10 June 2005

Sam Koutadia, The seven pillars of mental toughness @ Mindsport

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This study is based on interviews and focus groups with middle and senior managers at six acute trusts and one primary care trust. The next stages of the project include a management survey, debriefing groups, and case studies exploring how changes are managed in the aftermath of serious incidents.

**Participating trusts**

Bedford Hospital NHS Trust
Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
Northampton General Hospital NHS Trust
Whipps Cross University Hospital NHS Trust

NHS Bedfordshire Primary Care Trust
Gloucestershire Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust
North Bristol NHS Trust

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