A Guide To Seeking Mental Skills Training Consultations

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Mental skills training can be beneficial to one’s performance in a wide variety of domains, including sport and the corporate world. Because these skills can be applied to such an array of performance domains, those seeking mental skills training consultations should ensure that the consultation will fit their needs. This article discusses potential questions to ask consultants before pursuing a mental skills consultation, what to expect of consultants and the consultation process, and issues to consider when entering into a consultation.

Target audience: coaches, parents, business professionals

Introduction

Mental skills training can be beneficial to performance and to one’s overall well-being. An analysis of 90 mental skills interventions revealed moderate to large positive effects on performance for the clients of those interventions (Myers, Whelan, & Murphy, 1996). Many people can benefit from mental skills training, from coaches, parents, and teachers working with athletes and students to businesspeople in the corporate world. Effective training often requires the consultant and his/her consultation to match the needs and expectations of the client. In order for these needs to be met, you, as the client, must know what to ask, what to expect, and what to look out for when seeking a mental skills consultation for you, your team, or your staff.

What To Ask

One of the first questions you should ask yourself when seeking a mental skills consultation is what you want to get out of the consultation. If you are a coach, do you want your players to understand and apply mental skills while performing? Do you notice specific areas of weakness within your team that you want the consultant to address? As a businessperson, think about what it is that you or your colleagues want or need in order to improve your performance in the corporate world. Knowing what you want can guide you as you seek a consultant that will best fit your needs.

Once you know what you want and need, the next step is ensuring that the consultant is capable of meeting those needs. Thus, an opening question to ask potential consultants is what the consultant and his/her consultation plan can provide for you. Find out the consultant’s credentials and competencies. For example, if someone claims to be a sport psychologist, make sure that the person is, in fact, a licensed psychologist. When seeking mental skills consultations, professionals who are not licensed psychologists can still be highly experienced and effective, but may go
by different names, such as mental skills trainers or performance coaches. Regardless of the title the consultant goes by, you want someone who is honest about his/her credentials.

Similarly, ask about the consultant’s philosophy and approach to consultations. Is it an educational approach, in which the consultant aims to teach clients about mental skills and how to apply them? Or, is it more of a clinical approach, in which the consultant can step in and deal with more severe issues? Either way, the consultant’s philosophy, for the most part, should blend well with what you hope to gain from the consultation process.

An additional question to discuss with potential consultants concerns the logistics of the consultation. Before agreeing to anything, discuss when and where the consultations will take place, for how long, and with whom (i.e., if a coach is seeking consultation for a team, will the meetings be team or individual sessions, or a mix of both?). What are some potential topics that the consultant might cover? Issues of confidentiality should also be addressed early. Decide what information will remain confidential and who will be privy to what information (i.e., with which coaches can the consultant share information and what information, if any, can he/she share?). Further, the cost of each session, or for the consultation as a whole, should be discussed before committing to mental skills consultations.

What To Expect

Regardless of the consultant’s competencies and/or philosophy toward teaching mental skills, you should expect your consultant to be committed to you and the consultation process. The consultant should be respectful and flexible, prepared to adapt the consultation plan to continue to best fit your needs and the needs of your team or staff. Unless information arises in which the consultant is ethically required to break confidentiality and share information (i.e., if an athlete shares information that is/will be harmful to him/herself or others), you should expect the consultant to respect your confidentiality agreement.

Furthermore, you should expect the consultant to have some knowledge of the field, sport, or topic for which the consultant is providing training. It may be the case that a consultant is unfamiliar with a sport or corporate task, however, the consultant should do his/her due diligence, research the sport or task, and become familiar with it. Of course, the consultant could begin developing relationships with coaches, athletes, or corporate staff members by asking questions about the topic at hand, but too many questions could make people uncomfortable or make the consultant seem uninformed.

What To Look Out For

Although mental skills consultations can be beneficial to performance, you should be aware of certain potential issues when committing to a consultation to ensure that the consultation can meet your needs in a productive and ethical way. Earlier in the article, researching the consultant’s credentials was a suggested question to
ask before deciding to work with a consultant. Look out for consultants who claim to have competencies they cannot support with certain licenses or training. Of course, consultants can be highly skilled and effective without being licensed psychologists; trouble arises when a consultant claims to be something that he/she is not.

Next, be wary of consultants who promise to fix any problems or guarantee certain performance results. The consultant’s success should be measured by his/her ability to implement the mental skills training program, and not by the performance results of the clients. Working with a mental skills consultant will not guarantee success of the field or in the office. For examples, consultants cannot make you win, but they can give you the tools to make sure that you are mentally prepared to perform to the best of your ability. Respected and experienced consultants recognize this and commit to being dedicated and hardworking during the consultation process and to being ready to adapt to the changing needs of the client.

Example Consultation Structures

Different consultants approach mental skills training consultations in various ways. There is no formula for the correct consultation structure because different athletes, teams, and organizations have unique needs. However, here are a few examples of what to expect with most consultation structures.

According to Weinberg and Williams (2010), during the initial meeting with the client, whether the client is a player, a team, or a group of businesspeople, the consultant should discuss his/her approach and philosophy about mental skills training. With the ease of technology in today’s society, it is not uncommon for this initial meeting to take place over the phone or through a video chat. The consultant should emphasize the value of mental skills training, but that mental skills work in conjunction with physical skills; they do not replace physical skills. This initial meeting should also include some kind of needs assessment. For example, the consultant could use an informal interview to ask the client questions about what the client hopes to gain from the consultation. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the client? Vealey (2007) adds several skills that a client can expect throughout a consultation process, as they are fundamental skills to improve performance and overall well-being. These skills are foundation skills (i.e., productive thinking and self-confidence), performance skills (i.e., attentional focus), personal development skills (i.e., identity achievement), and team skills (i.e., communication and cohesion). All of these skills can be applied both in a sport or business context. Again, there is no correct formula for mental skills training consultations, but most consultation structures would include one or many of these suggested skills.

Consultations should be structured to explore a few desired topics (such as ones the client identified in the needs assessment as areas in need of improvement) over the course of a consultation if there is a limited amount of time or number of meetings for the consultation. The consultant should not merely skim the surface of numerous
topics; this generally does not produce results (Weinberg & Williams, 2010). Unless you decide on a finite timeline with a consultant, as long as the consultant is meeting your needs as a client, you could expect for the consultation process to continue to grow and evolve as you work together to improve your mental skills.

**Implications**

Being educated about seeking mental skills training consultations can help you get the most out of your consultation. Start with asking yourself what it is you want or need from a mental skills consultation. Then, be aware a consultant’s credentials, competencies, and areas of expertise when deciding if a consultant could meet your needs. Expect any consultant you work with to respect confidentiality agreements, adapt to your changing needs, and keep you best interest in mind. Considering these things when seeking your next mental skills training consultation can help you find the consultant who will be most effective for you and able to help you improve your performance.

**References**


