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Team Context

Jonathan runs a big team distributed across various locations in Asia. Since the move to hybrid working, he was finding it particularly challenging to maintain exceptional client service upward whilst at the same time protecting his team's wellbeing against the acute issues of stress-related burnout and attrition that many in the industry were facing.

In a very customer-centric business, service was paramount, and deadlines were tight and unforgiving. Supporting clients in North America from very early in the morning to Europe very late in the evening made for long working days, and the shift to hybrid working exacerbated a shift towards an 'always-on' culture.

Whilst the programme was a huge success for the whole cohort of nearly 30, this is Jo's story.

Jo's Background

Pre-programme

In the pre-programme Performance & Wellbeing survey, Jo recognised he wasn't performing close to his full potential. Whilst his mental Clarity, Energy and Stability scores were just above normal, he felt he was struggling to remain focussed without being distracted and his Focus score was in the bottom quartile.

Jo recognised there were significant improvements to be made to his diet, as well as his mental exercise routine (or lack thereof), but his main area of focus was on sleep.

Goals

Going into the programmes Jo's main goal was to regain a sense of control and to rebuild his energy levels. He felt he never had a break and was constantly juggling work and a young family. He was really struggling with sleep and was unable switch off from work.

The initial coaching session surfaced his very strong work ethic and determination to succeed in this role. This was captured in narratives that it wasn't just a job, but his permit to work and the key to their whole life in Singapore. He acknowledged that he was pushing himself very hard.

Tracking His 'Baseline'

Jo's Mental Performance Profile

The 2 week 'baseline' tracking period highlighted that when properly calibrating different aspects of his cognitive performance over time, his mental performance was worse than expected. Relative to how he can perform at his best, he was fulfilling far less of his potential than is normal.

He was spending no time at all on peak-form (operating >75% of potential) and 2 hours every day on low form (operating <25% of potential). The variance in his cognitive performance was high and he was significantly out of balance – he was on his best form between 10-2pm when his most demanding period at work was 2-6pm; he was worn out in the evenings (bottom quartile evening vs day imbalance); and worn down during the working week (bottom quartile for weekday vs weekend balance).

On a typical day, of 16 waking hours he was spending an average of 6 hours feeling tired, unstable, unable to think clearly or unable to focus.

See Figure 1.

He was also at the top of the range for time he spent feeling out-of-control or overwhelmed.

These are frequent characteristics of people in a pre-burnout phase.

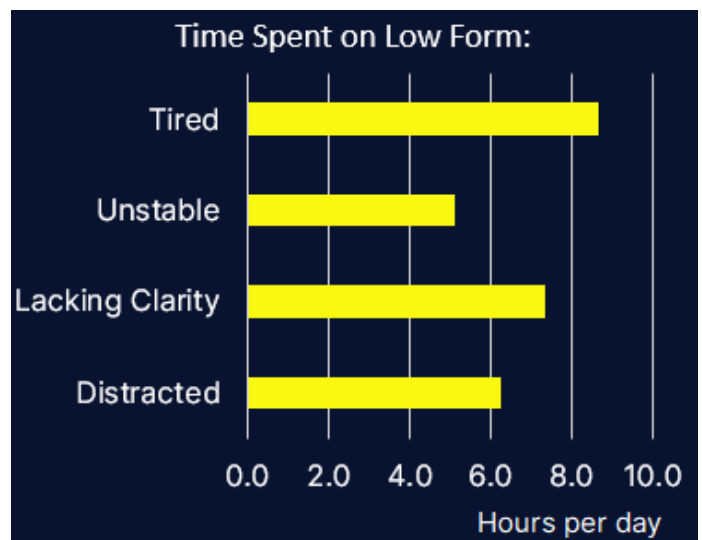


Figure 1: Time on Low Form

Jo's Lifestyle/Routine Profile

His sleep tracking showed that whilst his bedtime and his bedtime variability were good, his total sleep at 5.8 hours per night was low. His REM sleep was below average but acceptable, but he was very low when it came to deep sleep at just 0.9 hours. Interestingly, he felt his sleep quality was ok but relative to our normal distribution he got very tired, especially when it came to the evening when his family needed a "present dad".

Hallmarks of his lack of ability to switch off from work were also present in his overnight physiological recovery. His 'Recovery' score was low – i.e. the time it took for his heart rate to stabilise once he had fallen asleep was markedly longer than normal.

The baseline tracking period highlighted nutrition should also be a big area of focus for Jo. Not only was he in the top quartile for (1) his average daily Glycemic Load, (2) the number of high blood-glucose events (significant impacts to his blood sugar levels) and (3) the variability of his blood glucose, but his data showed strong evidence that consuming high glycemic loads had a negative impact on his cognitive function in the subsequent period.

The negative impact of Jo's diet on his short-term cognitive function was statistically very significant but this was a new insight. It wasn't a connection that Jo had ever made before.

The baseline tracking also highlighted that Jo was drinking much more coffee throughout the day than our benchmark. His total caffeine consumption was 98th percentile, and because he was trapped in a constant cycle of caffeine dependence throughout the day, he was also 97th percentile in terms of caffeine levels in his blood at midnight. The data strongly confirmed the dependence he felt – caffeine was making him feel better and getting him through the days.

His alcohol consumption was mid-range, but he was drinking in moderation, and it was not having a negative impact on his form.

The activity tracking showed that Jo was doing a lot of medium intensity exercise (>100 minutes per day, 6 days per week) which was having a strong positive impact on his form.

The Intervention

During the small group workshop on behavioural change, Jo worked through some of his prior assumptions about what he needed to do to perform, and he was challenged to reflect on his internal narratives and beliefs to see whether or not they were still valid. The really big ‘aha’ moment for him was when he recognised that saying no to things, whether it be delegating a late-night meeting or protecting time for mental breaks in his diary, wasn’t an act of laziness or selfishness, but something that actually helped him serve his team and his clients better.

He was able to use his data and this new mental framework to join the dots and see that rather than being ever more accommodating and propping himself up with caffeine and refined carbohydrates to work all hours, prioritising his self-care was the key to being more productive. This single re-frame and updated narrative, when supported with evidence and then reinforced by real-time experimentation and validation, changed a lot. What “being Jo” was, had changed.

The Outcome

Jo followed his detailed ‘change plan’ to experiment with specific behavioural changes and psychological reframes that focused on three areas: sleep, nutrition and mental exercise.

His sleep scores increased across the board with improvements in total sleep hours, sleep quality, REM hours and most notably a 21% increase in deep sleep, his primary target.

He also made dramatic changes to balance his diet, cutting back on his portion size, reducing sugary snacks, switching his macro-nutrient consumption away from refined carbs to healthy fats and proteins, and importantly consuming a much more stable glycemic load throughout the day.

Both these changes showed evidence of a significant positive effect on his cognitive function and energy during the second tracking period.

He supported these changes with a considered mental exercise regime consisting of more regular breaks during the day and a simple meditation practice.



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I didn't realise how little I knew about my form. I feel so much calmer, more able to cope and more on top of things.



Jo's mental performance was transformed – his average level of cognitive performance increased by 38%, his variance in cognitive performance decreased by 51%, and there were dramatic improvements in all 4 areas of cognitive function, most notable energy, where he went from spending 8.6 hours per day feel tired or lethargic to just 0.9 hours. This equates to over 24 less hours feeling tired per working week!



Not only did he increase his averages, but his performance became much more balanced - his efforts focussed on being on better form in the afternoon which was his most demanding time of day. The net result is that he reduced his overall gap in performance by almost two-thirds.

And finally, Jo didn't just perform better, he felt better. In the baseline tracking period, he felt out-of-control or overwhelmed for 5.7 hours per day. In the second tracking period he didn't record any time feeling out of control at all. This change took place in less than 9 weeks without making any changes to his external workload.

Jo noted that the insight and awareness he had gained during the programme had permanently changed his mind set and attitude towards how he looks after himself. This change in mindset, coupled with major lifestyle change, increased cognitive performance and a feeling of being much more in control left Jo invigorated, engaged and much less likely to suffer from stress-related burnout.

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In 3 words, it's been **INSIGHTFUL**, **EDUCATIONAL** and **TRANSFORMATIONAL**.