

The “Inner Game” of Facilities Management

Dealing with Stressors that Inhibit Performance

By Joe Whitefield

A strange thing happened to me this year. At some point in time unknown to me, I began receiving the Tennis Channel as part of my cable programming. Being the novice player that I am, I now find myself watching the tennis programs that involve lessons or tips for people like me. I have often thought that I would be motivated to play more if my game improved—so I watch. Most of the lessons I see are mechanical in nature showing how to produce a better stroke. However, I have come to believe that my problems are probably more mental than physical.

In his book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*, Timothy Gallwey, explores the common mental and emotional habits of tennis players, and their affect on performance. It turns out most of these habits actually detract from performance by ratcheting up the pressure, and inhibiting the mechanical and physical skills that produce actual improvement. Thinking too much, self judgment and criticism,

and trying too hard are some common mental habits that often introduce more stress, and actually make it more difficult to face the challenges of competition. In addressing these habits, Gallwey provides some thoughts and advice on eliminating the negative and unproductive mental habits, and replacing them with a better approach—this is called the inner game.

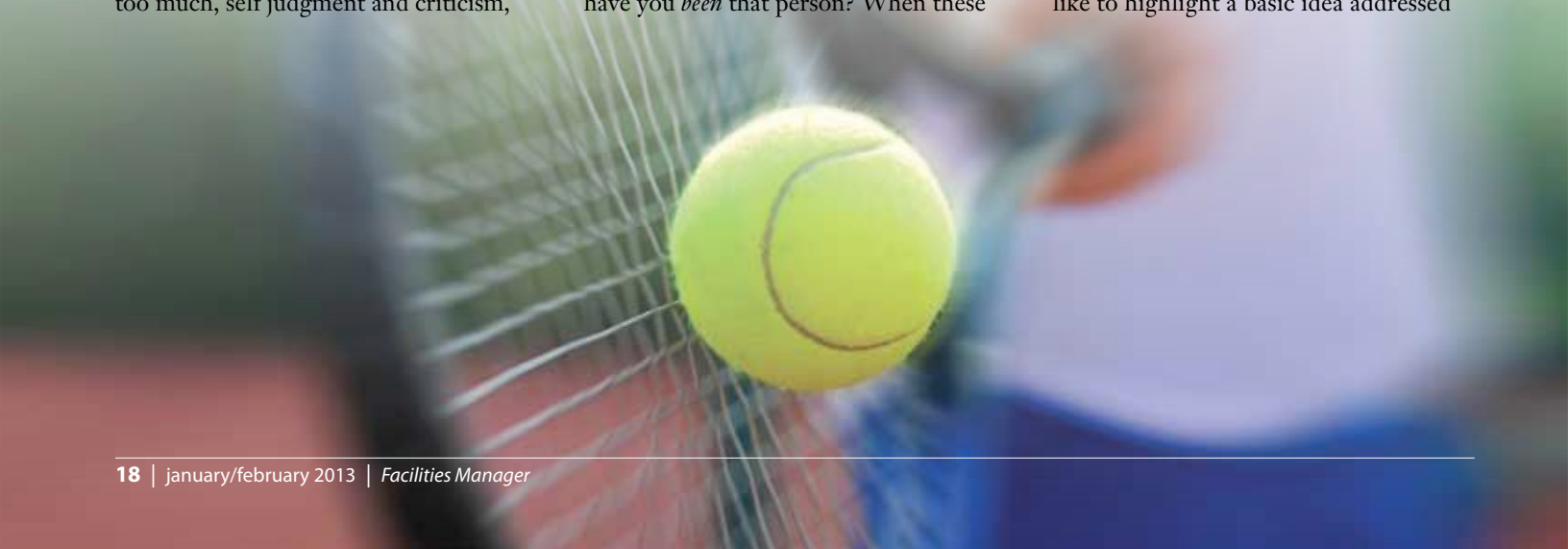
REACTING VS. RESPONDING

Like a competitive tennis player, facilities managers face many challenges as part of the job. These challenges require a requisite amount of technical skill and administrative acumen. These challenges also produce mental and emotional responses, in many different forms, that can inhibit effective performances. How many times have you witnessed a difficult situation that was made worse by a person’s emotional—possibly irrational—reaction? How many times have you *been* that person? When these

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reactions happen, pressures mount, communication is strained, time is wasted, unnecessary and unproductive activities emerge, and progress is slowed. Little things become big things.

Of course the subject of self management/self control is not new. Experts in relationships and business and organizational management abound. There is a mountain of material on emotional intelligence, self-awareness, social compatibility and the like in print—and readily available. With that said, I would like to highlight a basic idea addressed



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by Gallway on the subject that may help someone struggling with the over-reacting gene. The idea is simple: *stop judging*.

MENTAL STRESSORS

One of the keys to improved performance is to reduce or eliminate the mental stressors that produce so many negatives that make the situation worse. Most of the time, the mental stressors occur as a seemingly natural response to some mistake or negative event.

Reducing mistakes is a worthy endeavor. Eliminating them completely, however, is impossible. Therefore, we must learn to handle problems better. This begins with an attitude adjustment. Mental stress is more a result of our judgment of the problem than the problem itself. These judgments can lead to thoughts such as blaming oneself or others and invites a myriad of negative reactions that produce no value at a time when clarity and positive action are needed most.

In tennis, many points are won when one player hits the ball out of the court. There are typically three perspectives on this single event. The player who hit the ball out views this as a bad thing because the point is lost. The other player views this as a good thing because the point is won. The linesperson who called the ball out sees it as neither good nor bad—just a point played. As unusual as it may sound, tennis players should adopt the neutral mindset of the linesperson when evaluating their own shots. It is either in or out rather than good or bad. The player's physical skills can make the necessary adjustments for better shots much faster if they are not also overcoming the additional burdens caused by mental stress.

REPLACE JUDGING WITH INFLUENCING

In professional endeavors, the success of meeting challenges and overcoming problems can be affected greatly by adjusting an overly judgmental mindset. A mindset that is neutral can greatly reduce the emotions that add stress to a difficult situation. In the case of stressors, a neutral mindset is certainly better than a negative mindset and is even better than a simplified positive mindset. In short, the act of making judgments (negative or positive) subconsciously creates pressure that, very often, makes things worse.

Of course, simply saying “stop judging” is not enough in tennis or everyday life. Mental energy spent on judging should be replaced with a deeper focus on the situation at hand and things we can influence. What is the problem? What options are available to resolve the problem promptly and effectively? Who needs to be in the communications loop and when? These are all examples of attempts to increase our focus which accelerates both critical and creative thinking.

Think about a time when you saw someone respond well under pressure. More than likely they were calm, thoughtful, and decisive. They are typically well respected and their work speaks for itself. I am always impressed with people who exhibit these qualities and I want to be more like them in difficult situations. Like my tennis game, my shortcomings in this area may be more mental. I think I might try a new perspective.

Tennis anyone? 🎾

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