Mental toughness: Promising new paradigms for the workplace

Namita Ruparel*

Abstract: Mental toughness facilitates a psychological edge to a sports player. It helps an individual perform better than his/her opponents and strive to succeed under pressure. Although its implications for organizations were outlined at its conception, there is a dearth of literature pertaining to the construct. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to provide an overview of mental toughness and its importance at the workplace. Following a brief review of the construct, the article discusses the potential avenues for future research in terms of theory and method. Studying the role of mental toughness and its importance may serve beneficial to practicing managers in keeping their employees grounded to the workplace. The outlook of any organization is to recruit and develop a workforce that performs to the best of its abilities and a one which develops a positive attitude towards the operational and commercial confronts faced by the organizations. Researchers may draw the importance of mental toughness through this article on build upon the gaps identified.

Subjects: Work & Organizational Psychology; Introductory Work/Organizational Psychology; Behavioral Psychology

Keywords: mental toughness; organizations; employees; recruitment and selection

1. Introduction

Mental toughness is an important ingredient of athletic success. It is a psychological construct that allows an individual to become a better sports player (such as difficult training and difficult competitive situations in games) and emerge without losing confidence. It comprises having the...
natural or developed psychological edge that enables a sports player to: Generally, cope better than opponents with the demands placed by competition; and specifically, be more consistent and better than opponents in determination, focus, confidence, and control under pressure (Jones, 2002).

The scientific study of mental toughness has taken place principally within sports contexts (Gucciardi & Gordon, 2011), and developed as a result of being one of the most commonly applied but least understood terms used by individuals involved in the sports such as coaches and sports players (Jones, Hanton, & Connaughton, 2007). Along with the prevalence of mental toughness, increased scholarly attention to this concept in sports corresponded with the rise of positive psychology in which the focus of research as well as practice shifted from human malfunctioning toward that which also considers optimal functioning and strengths (Lopez & Snyder, 2009). Mental toughness is one such concept that resides on optimal functioning and strengths. It is considered as a resource that is important for rising above adversity and sustaining high levels of performance and functioning in the sports (Gucciardi, Hanton, Gordon, Mallett, & Temby, 2015).

1.1. Background
Mental toughness emphasizes that it is not only about dealing with the aspects of competition, but also about training and an individual’s lifestyle (Jones, 2002). Individuals’ lifestyle is what is his/her approach towards life. Mental toughness is an essential trait that helps the individual perform to the best of their ability and is about knowing one’s priorities at any given time and not getting distracted from them. A study reported that Olympic champions report high levels of mental toughness, coping, effectiveness and optimism (Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002). Another study emphasized on the developmental factors responsible for tough character, tough attitudes and tough thinking (Bull, Shambrook, James, & Brooks, 2005). They reported the antecedents of mental toughness as personal responsibility, dedication and commitment, belief and coping with pressure.

Clough (1996) (cf. Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012) emphasized on why certain athletes with great talents lose out to opponents that are less talented. It was because of the significance of traits like confidence, challenges, emotional control, commitment and how these play a role in sports success. This was implied to managers in work settings and it was concluded that some managers were clearly able and well qualified but did not achieve as much as others, some less knowledgeable were surprisingly effective, some were happy and used every minute for their own benefit (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012).

2. Mental toughness and organizations
Mental toughness is a construct that is essential to quantify in domains pertaining to performance and organizations invariably dwell on performance (Gucciardi, Jackson, Hodge, Anthony, & Brooke, 2015). There have been traces of scholars recognizing the essentiality of mental toughness among organizations and organizational development consultancies since the time it rippled its need in the sporting contexts. For example, the Curtis Management Group (1998) stated that “Mental toughness encompasses a perfectly disciplined will that refuses to give in to any situation. It’s a state of mind that can be termed as character in action” (cf. Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012).

A magazine reported people with mental toughness prosper within the world of work, as resilient and confident, on high ranking positions, driven, competitive and ambitious but not aggressive or domineering (Business Matters, 2015). The article stated that “a mentally tough individual is someone who is comfortable in their own skin, takes what comes in their stride and enjoys competition.” Success and mental toughness go hand in hand irrespective of demographics (sector, nationality, gender, race, etc.). On the contrary, a study (Marchant et al., 2009) on mental toughness among organizations reported that more senior the manager, the greater the level of mental toughness. Senior managers were more mentally tough when compared to middle line or
junior managers. Individuals who are not mentally tough are not mentally weak, they are mentally sensitive. Mentally tough individuals are not emotionally sensitive but they are emotionally intelligent. This means that they can well identify the situation and act according to it.

It was found that establishing this capacity among organizations and identifying elements that constitute of the characteristics of this construct is essential. Mental toughness among organizations includes technical skills, intelligence quotient and logical skills with the impact of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, intuition, meaning making and emotional intelligence (Carver, 2016). Conversely, cultivating mental toughness among employees leads to employees excelling in their role despite challenges, reduced sickness and stress, higher productivity and the ability to take on more, thrive and collaborate.

Furthermore, it was concluded that mental toughness is a stress buster for employees and employees use it as a personal resource to cope with the demands placed by the job (Klette, 2017). Employees with higher levels of mental toughness reported to be less distressed and were better able to cope with the challenges or demands in their life, which in turn was related with higher levels of performance (Gucciardi et al., 2015).

3. Potential gaps
Based on the review and understanding of the construct, this paper identifies theoretical and methodological advances for mental toughness.

3.1. Theoretical advances
Firstly, drawing from the study (Klette, 2017), having identified mental toughness as a personal resource for employees, literature on mental toughness has scope for enrichment with the support of job-demands and resource model (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). The extent of its effectiveness in facilitating employees to cope with their everyday demands is essential to explore. Secondly, analyzing the definitions of mental toughness as having technical skills, intelligence quotient and logical skills with the impact of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, intuition, meaning making and emotional intelligence, measuring the role of mental toughness in productivity and performance is a prospective avenue for future research. Third, since literature claims being mentally tough is being comfortable in one’s own skin, taking what comes in the stride and enjoying competition, the relationship between mental toughness and flow may be an important contribution to literature. This relationship may further contribute to the literature on flourishing and positive organizational behavior. Hereafter, learning from Clough and Strycharczyk’s book (Clough & Strycharczyk, 2012), the implications suggested may be empirically tested. Therefore, fourth, the link between mental toughness and leadership as well as leadership styles may be explored. Fifth, the role of mental toughness in team behavior can be assessed.

3.2. Methodological advances
Since the construct is relatively unexplored in the organizational context, there are several roadways to establishing the construct. Firstly, considering the dearth of academic literature in contextualizing mental toughness at the workplace, a prospective area of research would be to conduct qualitative interviews with employees. Such a study may ascertain the various claims made by researchers with respect to its implications at the workplace. Secondly, the two studies on mental toughness among organizations measure the construct by using the questionnaire developed generically through literature in sports context. Therefore, it is imperative to develop a sound measure of mental toughness for employees. This could be done following the conduction of qualitative interviews for employees. Thirdly, the contradiction of views in the levels of mental toughness call for studying the trait with a longitudinal design to track the progression and/or regression of the construct.
4. Implications at the workplace

Studying the role of mental toughness and its importance may serve beneficial to practicing managers in keeping their employees grounded to the workplace. The outlook of any organization is to recruit and develop a workforce that performs to the best of its abilities and one which develops a positive attitude towards the operational and commercial confronts faced by the organizations. Establishing the construct in academic literature may serve beneficial for recruitment and selection, retaining mentally tough employees who can sustain in stressful situations and perform to the best of their abilities; assessment and development, measuring competencies, employee development and talent management.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

Firstly, in this paper, we identify the need to cultivate mental toughness among employees for better performance and wellbeing which will in turn contribute to success of the organization. The contribution of this trait among employees although tested lacks evidence in various contexts. Training employees to become mentally tough will help them sustain under the fluctuating demands of the organization. Organizations must work towards recruiting mentally tough employees, if not then, training employees to become mentally tough and retain such talents for efficient functioning.

Funding
The author received no direct funding for this research.

Author details
Namita Ruparel
E-mail: ruparel.namita@gmail.com
ORCID ID: http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0905-6276

Citation information
Cite this article as: Mental toughness: Promising new paradigms for the workplace, Namita Ruparel, Cogent Psychology (2020), 7: 1722354.

References


