

GLAD TO BE HERE: LESSONS IN HIGH PERFORMANCE FROM THE BLUE ANGELS

John Foley

“Glad to Be Here.” Those four words meant something very special to me when I was a Blue Angel. They have even more significance to me today. My hope is that those four words will have a deeper and richer meaning to everyone who reads this article.

“Glad to Be Here” was a statement of belief that we shared on the Blue Angels team. It was our centerpoint, our purpose larger than self. Reflecting back on my experiences, it’s clear to me that those four words were really the “secret sauce” of our high-performance team. Sometimes “Glad to Be Here” meant that we were thankful for the opportunity to be a Blue Angel. Sometimes it meant that we were thankful for being surrounded by a great team of high-performing

individuals. And sometimes it meant that we were just grateful for being alive.

Always, however, “Glad to Be Here” was our mind-set. It expressed our joy, our awareness, and our readiness to perform at the highest levels. It was a statement of our love, our commitment, our trust, and our respect for everyone on the Blue Angels team, pilots and support crew alike. Each time a member of the Blue Angels said, “Glad to Be Here,” the special bond was reaffirmed and strengthened.

Is saying “Glad to Be Here” some kind of ritual? Yes, it *is* a ritual. Spoken rituals play an important role in developing and sustaining the habits and behaviors that result in high performance. When the Blue Angels say, “Glad to Be Here,” we really mean it!

36 Inches

Now let me ask you a question: How close together do the Blue Angels fly during an air show? I'll tell you the answer: The Blue Angels fly 36 inches apart from each other. That's closer than your feet are to your head! Imagine looking out of your glass canopy and seeing an airplane 36 inches from your wingtip!

What do you think that feels like? Do me a favor and extend your arm. Now imagine that at the end of your fingertips is a 22-ton jet fighter, flying 500 miles an hour—upside down!

How do you suppose the Blue Angels attained the levels of precision, teamwork, and trust required to fly so close together? What would it take for your team or your organization to accomplish similar feats?

My goal in this article is sharing with you the process and the mind-set that enables teams such as the Blue Angels to perform at the highest possible levels—and beyond!

Remember, I'm not just talking about *good* performance or even *great* performance. I'm talking about the *highest levels of performance*.

The typical performance pyramid includes four levels representing the majority, the many, the few, and the top 1 percent.

Most of us already have a pretty good idea of what it takes to get into the top 1 percent. There are processes, techniques, and disciplines that practically anyone can learn—if that's as far as you want to go.

The real question is: How do you get to the next level?

As you can see in Figure 2, there's a pyramid on top of the standard pyramid. This new pyramid represents the top .01 percent of performers. You need to do certain things differently if you want to reach this level. To perform at the .01 percent level, you need a different mind-set.

You still need to do everything that the top 1 percent does. But you also need to go beyond, up into the thin air of high performance.

Overcoming Obstacles

I meet regularly with people who are in the top .01 percent of their field. I've noticed that they tend to

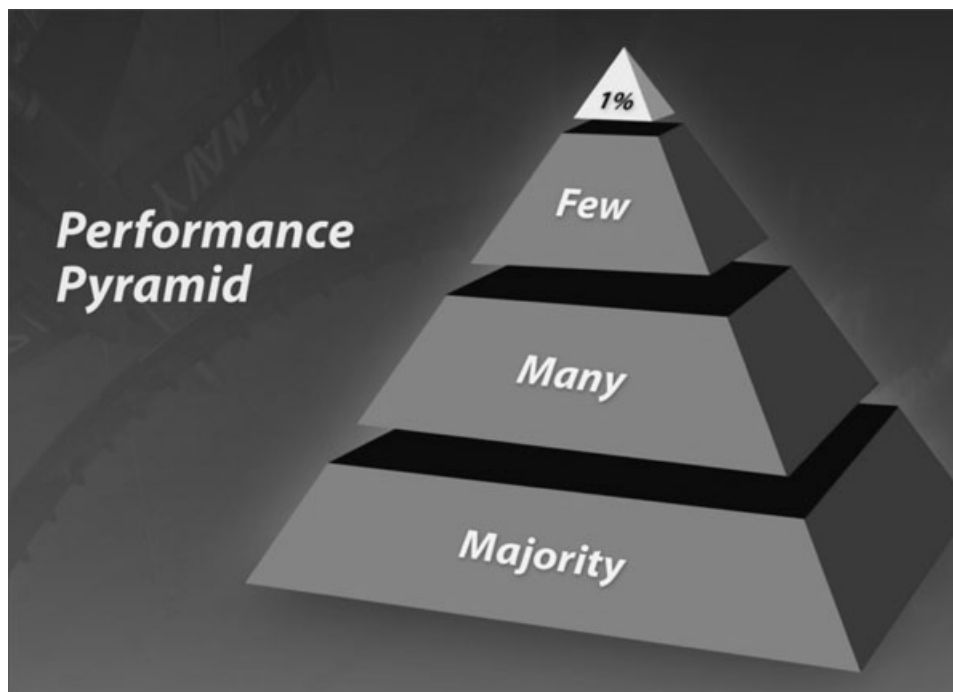


FIGURE 1. PERFORMANCE PYRAMID

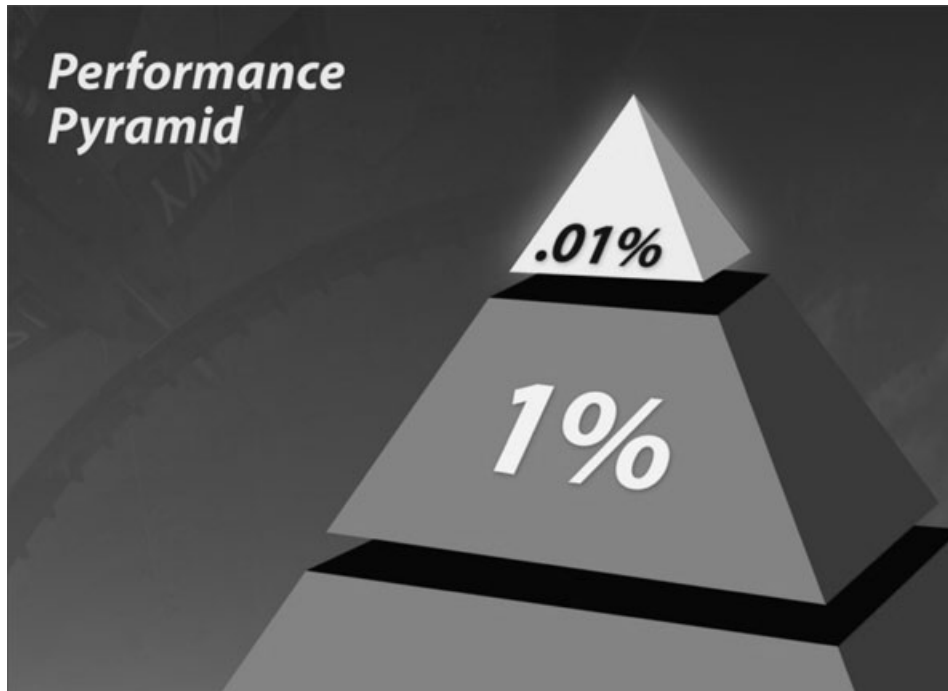


FIGURE 2. PERFORMANCE PYRAMID

share a common trait. Somewhere in their past, they were forced to overcome obstacles and obstructions that would have stopped most people. They will do whatever it takes to achieve their dream.

Closing the Gap

Several years after leaving the Navy, I worked with a venture capital firm in Silicon Valley. In my role at the firm, I had the opportunity to look closely at many companies. I learned how those companies operated, how they spent money, and how they made money—or at least how they planned to make money!

I noticed that very few of these companies had a framework or a methodology for continuous improvement and sustained success.

My experiences as a Blue Angel taught me that sustained success requires constant improvement. The world around you changes continuously, so accepting the status quo makes no sense. I was sure that the executives of these companies understood this, and I assumed that if they had a framework for continuous improvement, many of them would use it.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that some of the methods developed by the Blue Angels for attaining higher and higher levels of performance would also work for many organizations. I spent several years reflecting on the special nature of the Blue Angels, analyzing the unique methods we used to create and sustain our culture of excellence.

The result of this reflection and analysis is the Diamond Performance Framework, or DPF for short. The DPF is a methodology that builds on the lessons I learned from the Blue Angels and translates them into a repeatable process that can be adopted easily by organizations, individuals, and families.

The DPF provides the tools you need to trigger, enable, reinforce, and support the activities and behaviors that result in high performance and continuous improvement.

Why is the DPF valuable? Here's the short answer: High-performance teams and organizations do not arise spontaneously. They do not appear overnight. High performance is a process and a mind-set. It requires a methodology, and it must be practiced—

over and over. The DPF is a template, a roadmap, and a method for achieving the goal of high performance.

An Overview of the DPF

Before diving deeper into the details of the DPF, I need to emphasize that without the Glad to Be Here mind-set, the DPF is just a process, and nothing more. *When you build the DPF on top of the Glad to Be Here mind-set, you're flying with the Blue Angels and soaring to new heights.*

As you can see, the DPF looks like a diamond revolving around a CenterPoint. Let's take a quick look at each part:

CenterPoint—Maintaining Alignment, Adapting to Change, and Sustaining Execution

Every team, every organization, every family needs a CenterPoint, a “north star” that everyone knows and can easily find. Examples of common CenterPoints are goals, objectives, milestones, and checkpoints. Because CenterPoints reflect real-world conditions, they can change and evolve. Not all CenterPoints are created equal—you can have tactical CenterPoints

and strategic CenterPoints. The Blue Angels have tactical CenterPoints we use for reference while flying air shows (a particular building or specially placed truck) and a strategic CenterPoint that defines our larger purpose—we're the U.S. Navy's ambassadors of good will.

Belief Levels—Clarity of Vision

These are critical. As human beings, we rarely perform at our maximum potential. We almost always perform at the level of our belief. When we raise our belief level, our performance follows. Each time we elevate our belief level, we spiral upward on a path of continuous improvement. Our belief level creates the clarity of vision required for high performance.

The Brief—Focused Preparation

In the real world, nobody is telepathic or psychic. If you want people to understand what you're trying to accomplish, you have to explain it—in detail. Don't assume that everyone will just get it without a detailed explanation. The brief contains the relevant details that people need *before* they get started. The brief isn't about planning—it's about getting focused on the task ahead.

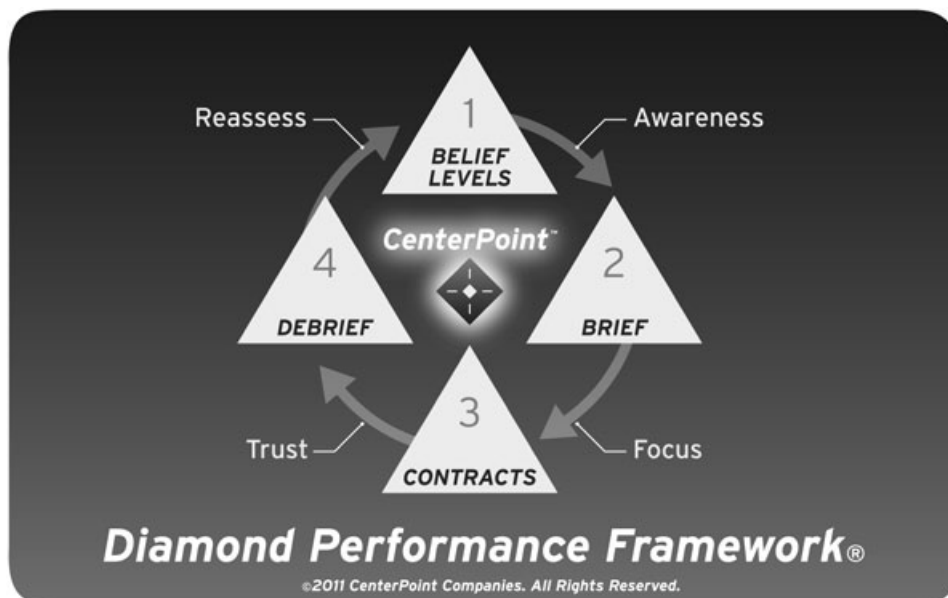


FIGURE 3. DIAMOND PERFORMANCE FRAMEWORK

High performance is a process and a mind-set.

Contracts—Disciplined Execution

Once everyone understands the goal, they need to commit to the actions that will be required to achieve it. I call it “execution through trust,” and it’s an essential step on the journey to high performance. Contracts, whether verbal or nonverbal, generate the trust that enables rapid and accurate execution. Contracts are critical because they elevate and accelerate execution.

The Debrief—Celebrate Your Victories

The debrief is an inward look for an outward result. It is a platform for continuous improvement, a process for making sure that vital information and important feedback is surfaced and shared in a timely way. The key to the debrief is total honesty. The debrief is a time for celebrating your victories and sharing your gratitude. The debrief raises your belief levels, preparing you for the next step upward. It is the most important facet of the Diamond Performance Framework and should be embedded firmly in your organization’s culture.

Debriefing isn’t a new idea. But relatively few companies make it a standard practice. That strikes me as ironic and ultimately wasteful.

The usual excuse for not debriefing is that it takes too much time. After an organization makes debriefing habitual, however, it will *save* time—mostly because people won’t keep repeating the same mistakes!

Another excuse for not debriefing is fear—in some organizations, debriefings can become confrontational and emotionally destructive.

The debriefings held by the Blue Angels are the opposite of that. They are intentional and emotionally

supportive. Imagine a bunch of fighter jocks sitting around a table freely sharing their innermost thoughts—that’s the right way to debrief!

For the Blue Angels, the debriefing room is a special place. It doesn’t matter where we hold our debriefing—wherever it is, it becomes sacred territory.

It’s sacred because of the commitment we bring to the process of continuous improvement. As a Blue Angel, you learn very early that you cannot improve your performance unless you are totally honest about what you did right—and what you did wrong. The Blue Angels hold a debriefing after every flight, whether it’s an air show with thousands of spectators or a practice in the middle of the desert. We always debrief, no exceptions made.

The Drive for Continuous Improvement

The Blue Angels are an iconic example of a high-performance team. When I took my first flight with the Blue Angels, I knew they were sending me a message. In a unique way, they were telling me that I had to raise the level of my performance by 300 percent—and I had three months to do it in. That’s the length of the training cycle for a new pilot.

OK, I can hear you saying, “Three hundred percent in three months? Is that some kind of joke? How can anybody raise their performance level by 300 percent in such a short time?”

Most pilots never fly anywhere near other airplanes. The vast majority of military pilots never fly closer than 10 feet to another airplane.

To stay with the Blue Angels, I had to learn how to fly 36 inches from the other planes during loops, rolls, and other aerobatic maneuvers such as flying upside down with my head just a few feet from the runway. That’s what it takes to fly with the best of the best. Every year, only three pilots are selected to go through the process of becoming a Blue Angel. I was blessed with a rare opportunity, and I knew that I would have to earn my place on the team.

After three months of intensive training, I learned how to fly like a Blue Angel. But the learning didn't stop there. After I mastered the art of flying 36 inches from another plane, I learned how to fly 18 inches from another plane. The Blue Angels didn't just move the goal posts, they moved the whole stadium!

Each time the bar was raised, the Blue Angels helped me raise my level of performance. With training and practice, I kept getting better—and so can you!

My experiences with the Blue Angels taught me the value of high performance, continuous improvement, and exponential leaps. I can't teach you how to fly like a Blue Angel, but I can teach you how to think, feel, and perform like a Blue Angel.

The Blue Angels have a process, of course. But the foundation of their success is more than just following procedure. What differentiates the Blue Angels from other great teams is their unique combination of attitudes, habits, and worldviews. Here's an ultra-quick summary of what I mean:

- The Blue Angels share a *mind-set*, a special way of looking at the world and seeing the potential for success that is often hidden behind the obstacles and difficulties of daily life.
- The Blue Angels create a *culture of excellence* that surrounds, supports, and nourishes them.
- The Blue Angels *transcend expectations*; they continually improve, innovate, and seek higher levels of performance.

Remember when I asked you to stretch out your arm and picture a 22-ton jet fighter at the end of your fingertips, flying 400 miles per hour, upside down? That's the view from my cockpit. There's a margin for error, but you can't have a bad day. And you fly every day. You're not merely in the top 1 percent of all pilots—you're in the top .01 percent!

The Yellow Helmet

Icons are powerful tools. They help organizations sustain a culture of shared values and beliefs. The Blue

The key to the debrief is total honesty.

Angels have several icons, including the golden helmets worn by the team's six demonstration pilots. The helmets represent our quest for high performance and continuous improvement, our commitment to each other and to the team, and our special responsibility to serve as ambassadors of good will to people all over the world.

Earlier in this article, there's a diagram of a standard performance pyramid in which the triangle at the apex represents the top 1 percent. That's where I was before I joined the Blue Angels—in the top 1 percent of pilots.

But when I took my first flight with the Blue Angels, I realized that I would have to raise my performance to an even higher level. The Blue Angels represent the top 1 percent of the top 1 percent of pilots.

The only way to attain and maintain that level of performance is through a culture of excellence. A culture of excellence does everything the top 1 percent does—and then goes beyond. A culture of excellence doesn't exchange one set of skills and values for another—it builds on those skills and values, raising them to a higher level.

What do you need to do to achieve and sustain a culture of excellence? How do you get to the top 1 percent of the top 1 percent—and stay there?

First, you need the process and the mind-set. These are absolutely fundamental and foundational to high performance. They are not fluffy—they are hard-core, nonnegotiable prerequisites for high performance. If seasoned professional military aviators can embrace these concepts, you can too!

Second, you need a framework that weaves the process and the mind-set into a seamless fabric. When the process and the mind-set are unified, they provide the lift that allows you to fly upward to the highest levels of performance.

Learning from the Blue Angels

I can honestly say that I learned some incredibly valuable life lessons from the Blue Angels. They aren't merely a bunch of great pilots—they are a family of wonderful human beings, with exceptional individual skills, a time-tested process, a culture of excellence, and a unique mind-set that empowers them to perform astonishing feats at the highest imaginable level.

It was an honor and privilege to fly with the Blue Angels, and I hope that some of the lessons I learned from them will prove valuable to you. As the Blue Angels say, *Glad to Be Here!*



John Foley served as a Marine Corps jet fighter instructor pilot, flew in the movie “Top Gun,” and thrilled audiences worldwide as the lead solo pilot of the Blue Angels. A graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, he also holds three master’s degrees: in business management from the Stanford Graduate School of Business (as a Sloan Fellow); in international policy studies from Stanford University; and in strategic studies from the Naval War College.

He is the founder and president of John Foley, Inc., which provides business performance training to Fortune 500 corporations, professional associations, sports teams, and educational organizations around the world. His Glad To Be Here® Foundation funds charitable works all across the globe. For more information, visit <http://johnfoleyinc.com/>. John can be reached at John@johnfoleyinc.com.