

2 Feel

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How do you want to feel?

It seems like such a simple question. Maybe too simple? Or simply elegant in the same sense that Brian Green used to describe the universe in his best selling book *The Elegant Universe*.¹ The best solutions he wrote are those that are as simple as they are powerful.

It seemed too simple to me as I interviewed hundreds of world class performers about their lives and careers expecting to hear about “hard work” and “perseverance” and “goal setting.” Those words were rarely spoken.

And yet they used that word over and over again—“Feel.”

I got interested in feel when I was working on my dissertation for my Ph. D. in Sport Psychology...and not from what I learned in class, not in my training or when I thought.

I was lucky enough to know several world class performers—a swimmer, a drummer, a heart surgeon, a veterinarian, a woman college basketball player...Jim...friends of mine, good friends...

These friendships were the key I never found in school, in the people who I was supposed to learn from, to listen to. My friends were well educated with long, impressive lists of achievements, but in their own way, in their own time, they started asking me about themselves. They were curious about my degree, about how athletes thought and trained, how they prepared. And the conversation began.

We were all “trained” to think, to analyze, to dig deeper, to learn techniques in our own fields. Yet the conversation kept coming back to the experiences we had as children and as teenagers—that playing required the same kind of discipline that our careers required. When we played with that discipline, we came alive, we felt “free.”

My dissertation focused on this freedom. When I thought and analyzed and had to come up with a dissertation topic, I made the mistake of focusing on freedom...there was something about freedom that made world class performers better than other people. They had the freedom to act and think and train and learn in ways other people did not.

¹ Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe*, Vintage Books; New Ed edition (October 25, 2005)

I was pretty full of myself. I was studying freedom, something important, philosophically challenging, testing myself. I set off to “free” the world.

I asked everyone I knew, anyone who would listen, who would talk to me. What is freedom? How would they define freedom? About a month into the process, I wanted to quit. Almost without exception, people answered by describing the lack of boundaries or the lack of oppression.

I was missing something. I blamed the people I was asking for not being curious enough, for not “thinking” about freedom. It was BORING...and I was boring myself.

Then one day, an ultimate Frisbee player exposed me. He told he had no idea what freedom was. Then he went on to say “but I feel the most free when I am flying through the air diving after the Frisbee in the end zone...”

And that is how I discovered “feel.”

He was not thinking about flying through the air...he felt it...right there in front of me. I saw it. I felt it. I felt it enough to want to go play frisbee, to see what it was like...and now I understood what all these others had been trying to tell me, what I was to hear over and over again in my work...and that turned my work into play. This was the message Jim’s teacher shared with him.

In interviewing hundreds of world class performers from a wide range of fields, I heard the same thing over and over again. No, I felt the same thing over and over again.

When I asked them to explain how they came to be world class (“How did you get where you are?”), every one of them struggled with an intellectual explanation...but for a few moments in every conversation, they came alive. They would light up, sit forward, and “feel” what they did. They told stories that transcended their resume, ignored their achievements. They told me their stories, stories defined not by what they did, but how it felt. They took me “there.”

What did you think when Jim repeated the question he heard me ask “How do you want to feel?”

Did you stop and ask “What is feel?” Probably not. Most people don’t. In fact, it seems like a silly question. They dismiss it as trivial, even irresponsible.

Almost no one ever asks me what I mean by feel.

Does how you feel affect how you perform?

Jim and I have asked dozens, maybe hundreds of audiences and thousands of people this question. Only a handful of people have said no. Again, no one ever asks us what we mean by feel. It is fascinating. In fact, people do not even hesitate. They nod and answer resoundingly “Yes!”

We then ask another question.

“When was the last time someone asked you at work (or anywhere else for that matter) how they could help you feel the way you want to or need to?”

The audiences break into laughter. When we ask why they are laughing, they say “No one.”

Yet, they have all just agreed that how they feel affects how they perform... and no one who is responsible for their performances or have offered to help them perform better has asked them how they can help them put feel to work for them.

I sat one day in a small meeting with Vice President of a large organization. Ironically, she was the Vice President for Leadership Development. We went through this Q and A about feel. Did it affect performance? Yes. What did she do then for her employees, for the leaders she was in charge of developing as far as this feel that affected their performance?

She said “Nothing. It is not my responsibility.”

Huh?

“You just said that how we feel affects how we perform?” I replied.

“Yes, but it’s not my responsibility to my employees to worry about how they feel.”

And for those of you agreeing with her, here’s the point. We could argue all day if you have a moral responsibility or an ethical responsibility to those employees. If you are part of an organization, who are you responsible to? Shareholders? Customers?

If you agree that how we feel affects how we perform, I would argue that to ignore feel is irresponsible...and this is the dilemma Jim faced when he heard me ask the question. This is exactly the opposite of what we are told growing up.

Yet, this is exactly what I heard in my interviews from some of the most successful people in the world.

The world class performers I interviewed, the friends who started me down this path, even those I work with who seem to have lost their way all said the same thing I had experienced in talking to the Frisbee guy.

At some point in their lives, they “felt something” when they did whatever it is they chose as a career...and they wanted to do it again and again and again...the more they did it, the better they got at it because they did it longer than people who worked at it...and the better they got, the more they felt how they wanted to feel.

How do you want to feel?