The values compass: Helping athletes act in accordance with their values through functional analysis

Henriksen, Kristoffer

Published in:
Journal of Sport Psychology in Action

DOI:
10.1080/21520704.2018.1549637

Publication date:
2019

Document version
Accepted manuscript

Citation for published version (APA):

Terms of use
This work is brought to you by the University of Southern Denmark through the SDU Research Portal. Unless otherwise specified it has been shared according to the terms for self-archiving. If no other license is stated, these terms apply:

- You may download this work for personal use only.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying this open access version.

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details and we will investigate your claim.
Please direct all enquiries to puresupport@bib.sdu.dk
The Values Compass: Helping Athletes Act in Accordance With Their Values Through Functional Analysis

Kristoffer Henriksen

University of Southern Denmark and Team Denmark

Corresponding Author:
Kristoffer Henriksen
Institute of Sport Science and Clinical Biomechanics, University of Southern Denmark, Denmark
Campusvej 55, 5230 Odense, Denmark
Tel: (0045) 65503497
E-mail: khenriksen@health.sdu.dk

To cite this article: Kristoffer Henriksen (2019): The values compass: Helping athletes act in accordance with their values through functional analysis, Journal of Sport Psychology in Action
To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/21520704.2018.1549637
The Values Compass: Helping Athletes Act in Accordance With Their Values Through Functional Analysis

Abstract

From a contextual behavioral science perspective, the form of behavior is less important than its context and consequences. Experiential avoidance occurs when athletes’ behaviors serve to reduce personal discomfort. Experiential acceptance occurs when athletes are willing to experience their inner life and use this willingness to remain focused on the task at hand. The Values Compass is a model that can be used as a tool for analyzing the function of athletes’ behavior. Through a seven-step process, the sport psychology practitioner guides the athletes towards increased awareness, and helps them take steps towards the life they value.
The Values Compass: Helping Athletes Act in Accordance With Their Values Through Functional Analysis

Athletes experience stressful situations in training, in everyday life, and in competitions. In times of emotional turmoil, it is easy to get carried away, lose track of your values, and act on emotions. Mindfulness and acceptance approaches argue that a key to athletes performing well under pressure is for them to be closely linked with their values and mindful of their inner life. The Values Compass (Henriksen & Hansen, 2016) is a specific tool to help athletes increase awareness of their values-driven and emotion-driven behaviors and take steps to create the life they value.

Acceptance-based models of performance take their starting point in the contextual behavioral science perspective (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes, & Wilson, 2012). From this perspective, all behavior is situated in a context, and the form of behavior is less important than the context and consequences of the behavior (Hayes & Strosahl, 2004). We need to consider basic learning theory concepts to understand why people behave the way they do. The behavior is the starting point of the analysis, followed by triggers and consequences, which are contextual factors (these three elements are inseparable). A trigger can be seen as the stimulus of a specific behavior, and the consequence is the behavior maintenance factor. Consequences refer to what happens after the behavior that makes the behavior more or less likely to occur again. A reinforcer increases the likelihood by adding something positive or subtracting something aversive. A punisher decreases the likelihood by adding an aversive or subtracting a desirable outcome. Different forms of behavior (in soccer, passing the ball when you have a chance to score or running a lot in less critical situations) may have the same function (avoiding negative emotions resulting from coach critique), which is why we are more interested in the function than the form of the behavior.

The aim of ACT interventions in sports is to help athletes increase awareness and flexibility (Baltzell, 2016). Experiential avoidance occurs when athletes’ behaviors serve to
temporarily reduce personal discomfort, and has been shown to be a core process in psychopathology (Hayes et al., 2012). Athletes under pressure often engage in behaviors that serve to alter internal states such as distraction, thought control techniques, emotion control, and even restrictive eating and self-harm (Lundgren, 2009). Inflexible athletes are restricted by private events such as thoughts and emotions (e.g., fear of failure), and their attention is not on the game but rather on these private events. Experiential acceptance refers to when athletes are willing to experience their pleasant as well as unpleasant thoughts and emotions and use this willingness to remain focused on the task at hand. Athletes who are flexible and aware can have different emotions, but they are present in the task and in the moment, and they react to what happens around them in the “game” (Henriksen, 2018)

Functional analysis refers to the process of analyzing – with the client athletes – the function of their behavior (Lundgren, 2009). Does any given behavior or decision serve to reduce unpleasantness in the short term, or to bring the athletes closer to their long-term valued directions? Behavior is not limited to overt physical behaviors but includes emotional (feeling) and cognitive behaviors (thinking). The analysis further includes triggering factors and the context in which the behavior occurs.

**The Values Compass**

The Values Compass (Henriksen & Hansen, 2016) is an adapted version of the Lifeline (Dahl, Plumb-Vilardaga, Stewart, & Lundgren, 2009). Overall, it serves to help athletes clarify how they want to approach their sport and their life, better understand what influences their behavior, and help them make decisions and engage in actions that bring them towards their valued ends. More specifically, it is often used at the beginning of treatments to help client and therapist analyze the workability of certain behavior patterns (functional analyses). The model depicts a crossroads (see figure 1) where an athlete can either take steps guided by his or her values (the values-driven
way) or take steps guided by (an attempt to avoid or control) emotions (the emotion-driven way).

Figure 1. The Values Compass Model used to illustrate a functional analysis of Simon in a difficult situation. The model is originally published in Henriksen & Hansen (2016) and used with permission from the authors.
At the end of the values-based way is a lighthouse. It symbolizes how athletes’ values serve to help them navigate. In ACT, values are desired qualities of behavior. They are about who we want to be. They are not goals, because you cannot achieve a value. In other words, you are not meant to reach the lighthouse (you would be grounded), but it is important in helping you navigate rough seas. They are also not rules, because they are freely chosen. The lighthouse includes the athlete’s game plan. The game plan is not the same as the values. It is often set for a specific training or competitive event, includes tactical and technical aspects, and is most often formulated in cooperation with the coaches. The game plan, however, must be aligned with the athletes’ values. In a sense, the game plan is the practical and tactical extension of the values for a specific task.

Filling in the model is a seven-step process, and it is important to be specific and detailed.

- Step 1 is to help the athlete formulate values and a game plan. The sport psychology practitioner will often introduce values early in the treatment to create a reference point. The values become a guide for the client and the practitioner and serve as a starting point for the analysis of whether the athletes are on their preferred track. Clarifying values includes specific committed actions and behaviors in line with the values.

- Step 2 is to describe a difficult and central situation. All athletes experience situations where they are under pressure and feel uncertainty. What is difficult for an individual athlete depends on his or her learning history. The difficult situation is defined as a situation in which the athlete acts out of accordance with how he or she wants to approach performance or where the behavior resulted in inefficient long-term consequences. Examples include situations in which an athlete yells at a teammate, gives up during an exercise, fakes an injury, or pushes themselves too hard despite an injury out of fear of losing their edge.

- Step 3 is to help the athlete describe and differentiate specific thoughts and emotions that showed up in that situation. This is easier right after it happened. If this is not possible, it is
often a good idea to ask the athletes to close their eyes and imagine the situation.

- Step 4 is to describe the specific action or behavior that was out of line with the values. A key question is “What did you do?” A good phrase to elicit behaviors is “If we had recorded you on video, what would we have seen and heard?”

- Step 5 involves helping the athlete understand how the behavior is reinforced. Reinforcements include positive reinforcements (e.g., attention and praise from surroundings) and negative reinforcements (e.g., getting rid of negative emotions and escaping unpleasant situations). With the athletes we simply use the term “short-term reward.” Because athletes have selected the specific situation as an example of non-desired behavior, it can be difficult for them to see any reinforcement.

- Step 6 involves describing the long-term consequences of the behavior. Where the rewards are immediate, the consequences are longer-term but can be as little as minutes later. This includes examining where the behaviors take you in life, and what the costs of avoidance are. If you withdraw from an exercise in which you doubt your abilities, the consequence could be that you miss a learning opportunity. Understanding that previous behavior strategies (avoidance) are not working is referred to in ACT as creative hopelessness.

- Step 7 is to revisit the values and formulate alternative actions that are aligned with the values. This may lead to small adjustments in the values. The athlete will then describe anticipated consequences and rewards of choosing the valued behavior. These will often be the opposite of those associated with the emotional way. If you do not withdraw from an exercise in which you doubt your abilities, the immediate consequence is that doubt and fear will not disappear. It will be unpleasant, but the long-term reward is learning a new skill.

The learning principles of reinforcers and punishers are logical but also difficult to grasp.

With the athletes we summarize this as rewards (positive) and consequences (negative). The model
displays how in the emotion-driven way rewards are short-term and consequences long-term, and that the opposite is the case when taking the values-driven way.

ACT is not a fixed protocol but allows artistic freedom (Hayes & Strohsal, 2004). This is also true of the functional analysis. While the steps are listed in a specific order, the analysis will not always follow this order. For some athletes, particularly at the beginning of a sport psychology intervention, the concept of values can be too difficult to relate to. In these cases it is easier to simply look at valued behaviors (how would you like to act?). When working with athletes who do not yet have a clear view of their values, it is possible to start in step 2 and simply ask them to describe a situation in which they were not happy with the way they acted. Later, they can come back to values and valued behavior through questions such as: “What value do you think lies behind your dissatisfaction with the way you acted?” And “How would you have liked to act in that difficult situation, and what values would that action express?”

Below is an example of applied work helping an elite athlete make conscious decisions to act in accordance with how he wants to perform.

**When a Small Mistake Triggers a Series of Mistakes**

Simon is a world-class athlete in the worldwide sport of orienteering. Orienteers run an unknown course in unknown terrain by visiting a number of checkpoints in a predetermined order, with the help of a map and compass. The orienteers must navigate and make quick decisions while running at high speed. In individual competitions, the athletes start in a time trial fashion (with one or two minutes between each athlete’s start time). This means the athletes run alone, only rarely see other athletes, and receive no feedback regarding how well they are doing, which provides fertile ground for many evaluative and stressful thoughts.

Simon is part of the Danish National Team, has been an orienteer since age six, and has several top ten places in international championships. Simon often performs well, but over time he
Functional Analysis Through the Values Compass

came to realize that when he had a bad start to a race, he tended to panic and make several mistakes. I had already worked with the team for an extended period (see e.g., Henriksen, 2015a) and helped Simon with numerous issues in the past.

In our earlier work, Simon had already formulated values for his athletic life, his school life, and his private life, and he generally comes across as a person well-grounded in his values. Simon’s values as an athlete included running in a way that demonstrated patience and wisdom. This translated into a game plan that involved taking the time to read the map well and letting the map (i.e. the difficulty of the terrain) dictate his running speed (step 1). We selected a specific situation as an example of his overall challenge of performing well after a bad start (see figure 1).

The situation was a recent world cup competition. He had made a small (20 seconds) mistake on the first control (step 2). In our meeting he could vividly recall the thoughts and feelings that arose in the very moment when he realized his mistake. He described feeling panic and thinking “this was exactly what should not happen,” “all my preparation has been a waste,” and also “I cannot let this happen, I have to make up” (step 3). Immediately, without realizing it in the race, he would speed up. In order to do so, he would read the map less often and less thoroughly, and hope that his quick decisions regarding route choices would be right (step 4). He did not have a hard time understanding how this was rewarding (step 5). When I asked him to close his eyes and try to recall the race, he described how the panic was diminished (negative reinforcement). He also described a strong sense of “I am fixing my early mistake,” and running at the limit of exhaustion made him feel he did his very best (positive reinforcement). On the other hand, he knew this was not the right solution. In the specific situation, his increased speed had led to a series of small extra mistakes, and he was irritated that he did not manage to connect to his values, to be patient, and to let the map dictate the speed (step 6). Revisiting his game plan, he formulated a short routine to help him refocus on the task. This included squeezing the compass (the slight pain helped him be present-
moment focused) and looking at the map to decide how to approach the next control. In the short term, this meant he would not feel relief from the feeling of panic, but he would be true to his values and run a good rest of the race (step 7).

Simon has run several races since, including ones in which he has made small mistakes early in the race. When asked, he described that understanding how his unworkable behavior is reinforced has helped him accept the panicky feeling as natural and refocus on the task. The values clarification that was carried out in connection with the analysis (knowing how his values translate into actions in specific difficult situations) was also helpful. Today he feels pride when, after an early mistake, he registers his thoughts and feelings and manages to stick to the game plan.

**Reflections**

The functional analysis aims to uncover the behavioral function in context, which is different from uncovering the behavioral form/topography. In other words, we are not distinguishing between good and bad behaviors per se but rather aiming to help athletes understand the function of avoidant behavior, and how it is unworkable in the long term. This is an important part of helping athletes accept the full range of their experiences and develop psychological flexibility.

The functional analysis cannot stand alone. From the presented case it is clear that working with the model involves elements of clarifying values and discussing committed actions and strategies of acceptance. Conceptually, these are not part of the functional analysis per se, but in ACT practice these elements are often intertwined. Values are dynamic and likely to change over time. The Values Compass is also useful for ongoing adjustments of an athlete’s values. In the above case example, the analysis also formed an initial part of a longer effort, although in the present context the next steps have not been described in detail. The functional analysis can also be used by sport psychology professionals in supervision to analyze situations in which they act out of
**Functional Analysis Through the Values Compass**

accordance with their our values (e.g., postpone a difficult talk).

ACT is a contextual therapy approach, and the functional analysis is an important part of working from this perspective (Dahl et al., 2009; Hayes et al., 2012). In the best cases, the functional analysis provides a good foundation for further work, because it helps the athletes (1) understand that their previous behaviors have not worked to bring them closer to their valued ends, (2) accept their feelings as natural and understand that the problem is not their feelings but their behaviors, and (3) think about their values and how these translate to specific behaviors in their sport. This often motivates the athletes to let go of previously reinforced behaviors and be open to trying new ones.

To gain maximum benefit from the functional analysis and the Values Compass, it is important to help the athletes select the right episodes to examine. First, they must select a specific situation in which they acted out of accordance with whom they want to be. If you allow athletes to select a class of typical situations (e.g., when I make mistakes), they have difficulties remembering specific thoughts, feelings, and actions. Second, it is helpful to select a recent episode, because it makes it easier to remember. It is recommendable to introduce the model “at home” and use it during camps and competitions to go through specific difficult situations within hours of when they took place. It is less important, however, that they pick the very best example, where their actions had the most dire consequences and in the most important situation. It often makes sense to start out easy, to fill in several versions, and to slowly get to the most problematic examples.

In order to provide effective sport psychology services, interventions must be contextualized in the sense that they are adapted for the specific target group and athlete, and to the context in which they are delivered (e.g., national and sport-specific cultures) (Schinke & Stambulova, 2017). The functional analysis is always contextualized and tailored for the individual athlete, as it is based on learning principles and contextual information. Therefore, using the Values Compass Model is an example of contextualized practice.
Figure Captions

Figure 1. The Values Compass Model used to illustrate a functional analysis of Simon in a difficult situation. The model is originally published in Henriksen & Hansen (2016) and used with permission from the authors.

References


