

Can sports psychology be applied to Brussels lobbying?

Can we use knowledge gleaned from the domain of sports psychology to aid lobbying efforts in Brussels? Apparently we can, says Tony Houghton, director of TG2, a UK public relations and lobbying consultant to the medical device sector. Here he tells us how.

"Much research has been undertaken, and is on-going, to understand the mental processes to which the elite athlete is subjected during performance and to harness that understanding for maximising result output.

From this research we observe that sports psychologists are concerned about the individual. They are interested in group dynamics in a team but again, it is from the viewpoint of the individual.

Much medical device lobbying seems to focus on the argument and little upon the attitudes, performance and motivation of the individual lobby target, be they Commission staff, MEPs, NGO staff or other agency personnel. Medical device companies by their very nature are scientific and technical. There is a tendency for lobby arguments to emphasise these tenets and less so the economic, social and,

most importantly, political dimensions. However, even the better presentations, which are more likely to embrace all these aspects, usually fall short of recognising the individual response to the arguments.

Sports psychologists have developed, researched and refined the "Achievement Goal Theory". This states that individuals have a personal internal characterisation of what achievement means to them for a specific situation. Originally, two types of achievement goals were said to be activated depending on self-concepts of ability in operation at the time.

When gains in skills mastery are involved the individual is said to be 'task involved'. In contrast, when achievement of more with less effort than that of others indicates competence, they are said to be 'ego involved'.

A more refined conceptual approach has emerged and is now widely accepted. Three goal perspectives are defined:

- i) Pure task involvement = the athlete's concern is with learning and putting in effort with no direct or observable competence outcome;
- ii) Self referenced ego involvement = the athlete's concern is with the adequacy of

personal ability associated with the level of current skills, i.e. the achievement goal is centred on demonstrating the adequacy of current personal skills, irrespective of the skills of others;

iii) Norm-referenced ego involvement = the athlete's concern is with the current definition of ego involvement, wherein achievement is conceived of as demonstrated ability that compares favourably with the ability of others.

Sports coaches are taught to assess and characterise their players (there are recognised questionnaires) and set goals accordingly.

The tripartite aspect of the conceptual perspective can be taken further recognising the types of goals that predominate. For example, we may consider which type of ego or task orientations drive the work of middle management EU Commission staff:

This motivation map is different for different lobby targets: Commissioners, Cabinet staff, MEPs, EU Agency staff and patient NGO staff. Individuals in each group will lean towards the three achievement goal types to a greater or lesser extent.

No doubt we have all met

lobby targets whose egos have seemed to be at the fore. However sports psychology theory identifies some interesting characteristics of ego-involved athletes. They are concerned how they are doing compared to others and may:

- avoid challenge (choose tasks that are too easy or too hard);
- stop trying when success is unlikely;
- cheat or be unsporting;
- experience vicious cycles of anxiety and de-motivation.

The next time that you have a lobby campaign in development, not only must you go beyond the technical and scientific arguments to embrace the social and pure political dimensions, you must also assess the nature of the individual you are confronting. Are they task, self-ego or norm-ego oriented for their achievement goals? Adjust your style accordingly.

This article is based on a report published by Mr Houghton in July 2005 called "Medical device lobbying in Brussels: gaining company specific competitive advantages". For details, email: tony.houghton@tg2eu.com. ■

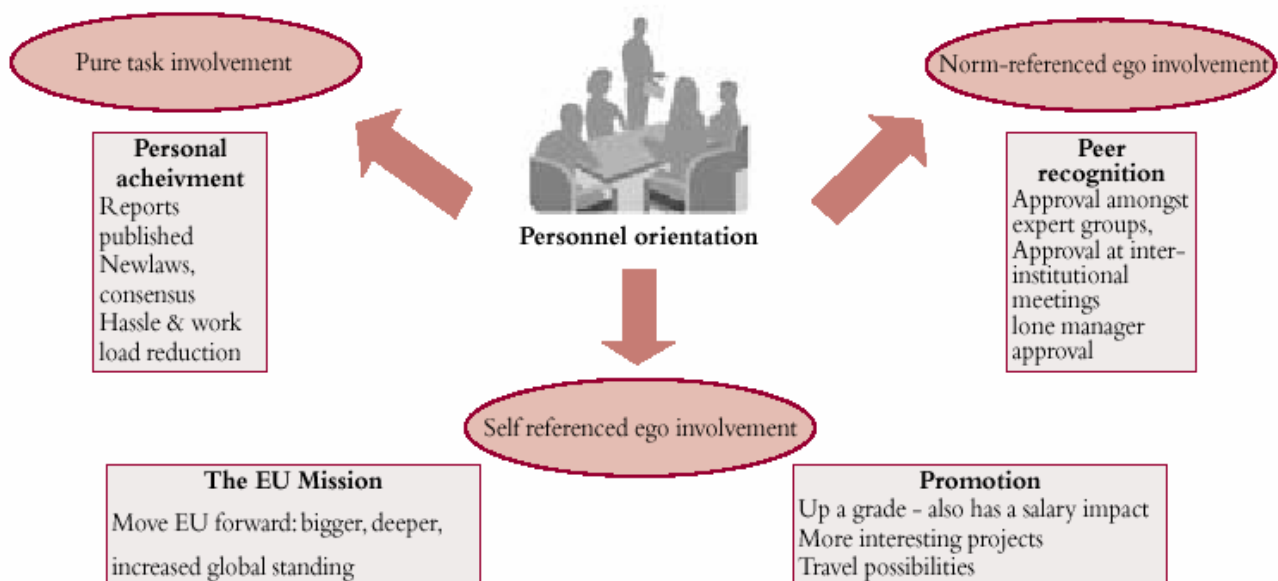


Figure 1 Motivation of EU Commission staff: application of 'Achievement Goal Theory'