

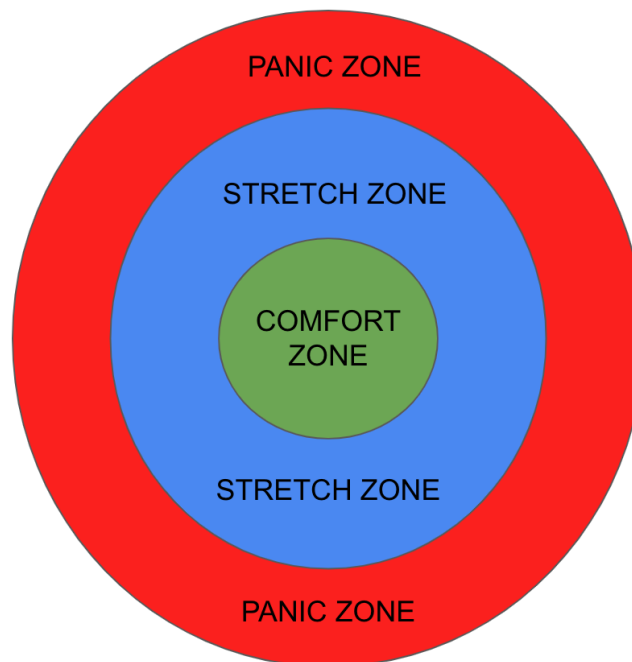
STRETCH ZONE EXERCISES

OVERVIEW

These activities are designed to introduce participants to some basic theory to get them thinking about the importance of pushing themselves outside their comfort zone, and into the stretch zone which is where the magic happens!

Depending on your own style and the participants' preferences, you may decide to do one of the exercises / play one of the games first, have a debrief, then introduce the below theory, or otherwise lead with the theory, and then play a game to then make observations, and discuss how it all comes together.

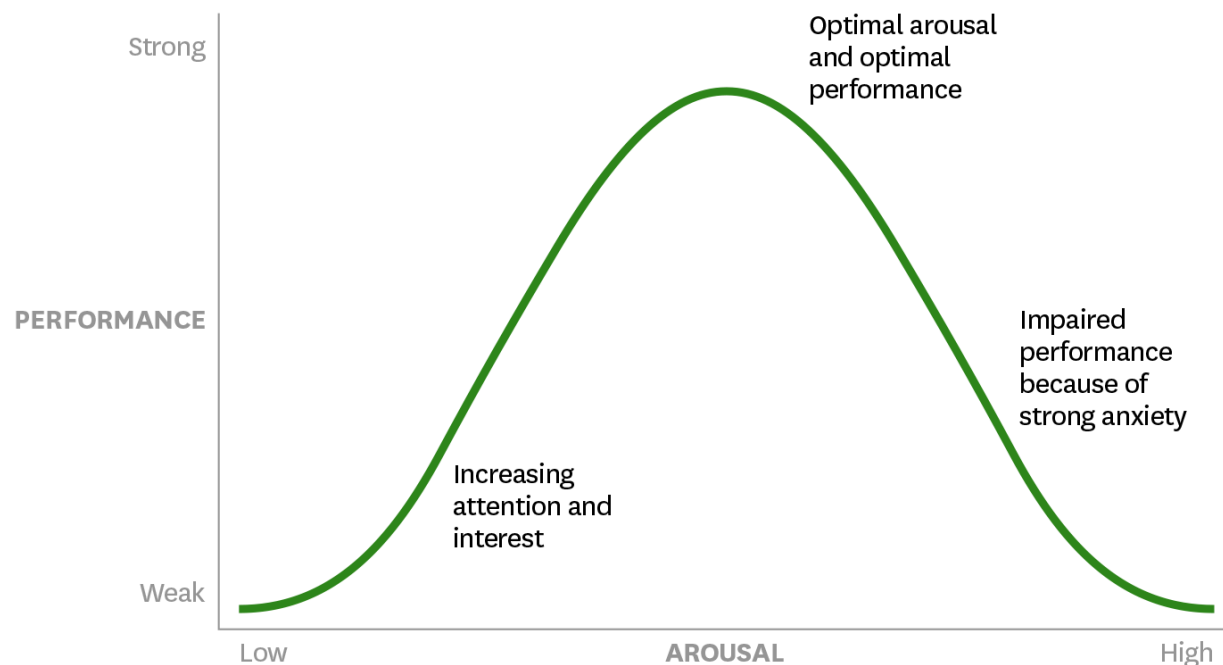
So here comes the theory



The origins of the comfort-stretch-panic zone model can be traced to the [Yerkes-Dodson Law](#), developed by psychologists Robert. M. Yerkes and John. Dillingham Dodson in 1908. According to the law, performance increases with physiological or mental arousal or stress, but only up to a point. When the stress becomes too high, performance decreases.

The Yerkes-Dodson Law

How anxiety affects performance.



SOURCE ROBERT M. YERKES AND JOHN D. DODSON

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Comfort Zone: The comfort zone is a state in which your ability and skills match the degree of challenge in a situation or activity. You're fully in control of the situation and the tasks at hand. Being familiar with the situation and having prior experience in the field creates a state of relaxation and a zone of comfort.

Ask the participants for examples of comfort zone activities. (e.g. their everyday tasks, their core job, taking the train to work, reading a nice book on the beach, doing a type of sport they are proficient in, speaking their mother tongue)

Stretch Zone: The stretch zone is a state in which the degree of challenge in a situation or activity slightly exceeds your ability to tackle it. This shift in balance creates a constructive tension, putting you in an arousal state. You feel nervous and excited because you have yet to learn how to handle the challenges, how to reach the goals, how to solve the problems. The marginal gap between your abilities and the degree of difficulty can be an opportunity for you to move outside your comfort zone and grow. This is why the stretch zone is considered ideal for new learning to take place, especially with the right guidance and leadership. The stretch zone is considered to be the optimal zone for high performance.

Ask the participants for examples of stretch zone activities. (e.g. taking on a new project, taking on a new role / responsibility at work, driving to work for someone who is new to driving, learning a new skill, doing a type of sport they have no or limited experience in, speaking a foreign language)

Panic Zone: The panic zone is a state in which the degree of challenge in a situation or activity far exceeds your ability to tackle it effectively. This creates a disequilibrium that can throw you off balance into a state of anxiety, fear and self-doubt. The panic zone is therefore considered least conducive for new learning and growth and is associated with impaired performance because of strong anxiety.

Ask the participants for examples of panic zone activities. (e.g. navigating a global pandemic, taking on a new role in an organization that is not a fit for your culture / skillset, taking a test you have not studied for)

ACTIVITY 1: RAFT FLIP

1. **Set-up:** Get the participants to stand on a tarp of appropriate size (spacious yet not too big for the group so there is room to maneuver but it's not so large that the game is too easy).
2. **Task:** Their task as a group is to figure out how to flip it over without anyone falling off the tarp (into e.g. shark-filled ocean)
3. **Time:** Add a time limit to ensure rigor and to make it realistic.

4. **Goal:** They must figure out how to slowly flip back one corner and reposition themselves as they gradually fold the raft over to the other side. (don't tell them this, it should be clear from the task but we want them to discuss amongst themselves how they will do it and figure out the execution strategy)
5. **Additional uncertainty elements:**
 - a. You might tell them the goal is to have everyone stay on the tarp the entire time so they don't fall into the ocean but not tell them if there is a chance for them to bring the fallen team member back on the raft should they fall.
 - b. Don't tell them what happens if they do fall (E.g. do they get disqualified? What happens?) to add a bit more ambiguity.
6. **Optional intervention (half-way):** Turns out there was a hole and water was getting through in a certain part of the raft so all participants now need to move to the other side.
7. **Optional intervention (towards the end):** Turns out sharks have circled the raft, you have less time than was originally allocated to finish the task. Things have become more urgent / chaotic now.
8. **Debrief:**
 - a. Discuss how it went generally. Hear what bubbles up.
 - b. Pull up the Comfort Zone - Stretch Zone - Panic Zone diagram. Discuss how they felt about stepping out of their comfort zone. Were they ever in the panic zone? What / who brought them back?
 - c. What was ambiguous? How did the interventions come into play?
 - d. Who was the leader (if anyone)?
 - e. What was their strategy?
 - f. What process did they follow? Did they have a discussion first, assign roles, etc. then jump in knowing their methodology or did they just jump in and learn along the way?
 - g. What contributed to chaos?
 - h. What would they have done differently now with the benefit of hindsight?
 - i. How does this exercise apply to everyday work challenges?

ACTIVITY 2: BANANA, CUP, MARBLE

1. **Set-up:** Get the participants to stand together and hand them a marble, a cup and a marble. You might decide to break the group into two (and have them compete) in which case, you will assign the groups, and hand out one of each equipment.
2. **Task:** The team(s) must transport a marble across a room by balancing it on the top of an upside-down cup, which in turn is balanced on a bandana that everyone holds. The bandana functions as a tabletop if everyone pulls it tight and keeps it flat.
3. **Time:** Add a time limit to ensure rigor and to make it realistic. E.g. 10 minutes
4. **Goal:** The goal is to transport the marble across the room once without dropping it. Every time it drops, they have to pick it up and start over.
5. **Optional intervention (half-way): The factory just called.** Turns out the marble is defected, so now they have to get a new marble (hand them a new one) and they have to choose between waiting for a new marble (time will lapse and they will have less time to achieve the goal) or get one that is bigger in size and therefore harder to balance.
6. **Optional intervention (towards the end):** Turns out the inspectors are coming in and so we have to show them our magic with the marble. In a minute when they come in, the teams will get a chance to do it once and they HAVE to get it across the room without dropping it to win and / or stay in the game (Whether they have already achieved this before or not)
7. **Debrief:**
 - a. Discuss how it went generally. Hear what bubbles up.
 - b. Pull up the Comfort Zone - Stretch Zone - Panic Zone diagram. Discuss how they felt about stepping out of their comfort zone. Were they ever in the panic zone? What / who brought them back?
 - c. What was ambiguous? How did the interventions come into play?
 - d. Who was the leader (if anyone)?
 - e. What was their strategy?
 - f. What process did they follow? Did they have a discussion first, assign roles, etc. then jump in knowing their methodology or did they just jump in and learn along the way?
 - g. What contributed to chaos?
 - h. What would they have done differently now with the benefit of hindsight?
 - i. How does this exercise apply to everyday work challenges?

ACTIVITY 3: BUILDING BRIDGES

- 1. Set-up:** Divide the participants into two even teams. Collect materials that can be used to build a bridge (straws, lego, cardboard, and other materials to build with) Make sure that both teams are far away from each other so they can't see each other
- 2. Task:** Two teams must build separate halves of a bridge using the material they are given. Once their halves are done, they'll have to figure out how to make the halves fit. Teams can exchange ideas about their bridges but can't see what each team is building
- 3. Time:** 40 -60 mins
- 4. Goal:** The goal is to build half of a bridge together with half of the team and then combine it with the other team's to have a fully standing, fully integrated bridge in the end.
- 5. Optional intervention (half-way):** Tell them that one member from each team can visit the other team (and view the progress of their architecture) to then come back to their team and feed it in, to explain to them how they are building theirs etc. However, should they choose to use this 'travel budget', they will have to pay for it with time as currency. Their time will be reduced by e.g. 5 mins for each person who visits. They can choose no visits, one visit (one person from one of the two teams visits the other team) or two visits (one person from each team visits the other - the visits do not need to happen simultaneously)
- 6. Optional intervention (half-way):** Turns out one of the materials was defected (choose one that makes sense on the spot, e.g. the straws, preferably one you can see is used by both teams to a similar degree and also one that hasn't been used too much or too little to ensure continuity and fairness) so they will need to be removed from the architecture before they can go on.
- 7. Debrief:**
 - Discuss how it went generally. Hear what bubbles up.
 - Pull up the Comfort Zone - Stretch Zone - Panic Zone diagram. Discuss how they felt about stepping out of their comfort zone. Were they ever in the panic zone? What / who brought them back?

- c. Discuss any resemblance to geographically dispersed teams
- d. What does this exercise show us about (verbal) communication?
- e. What was ambiguous? How did the interventions come into play?
- f. Who was the leader (if anyone)?
- g. What was their strategy?
- h. What process did they follow? Did they have a discussion first, assign roles, etc. then jump in knowing their methodology or did they just jump in and learn along the way?
- i. What contributed to chaos?
- j. What would they have done differently now with the benefit of hindsight?
- k. How does this exercise apply to everyday work challenges?

ACTIVITY 4: MARSHMALLOW CHALLENGE

1. **Set-up:** Put the participants into teams of 3-6 and hand them 20 spaghetti sticks, one meter of tape, one meter of string, and one marshmallow. The teams can be close and can see how each one is getting on but do give them some space and scatter them around so they don't have full visibility of everyone's towers
2. **Task:** Teams must build the tallest free-standing structure within the time limit using the above materials with the marshmallow on top. The structure has to be standing on the ground.
3. **Time:** 20-30 minutes
4. **Debrief:**
 - a. Discuss how it went generally. Hear what bubbles up.
 - b. Pull up the Comfort Zone - Stretch Zone - Panic Zone diagram. Discuss how they felt about stepping out of their comfort zone. Were they ever in the panic zone? What / who brought them back?
 - c. What was ambiguous? How did the interventions come into play?
 - d. Who was the leader (if anyone)?
 - e. What was their strategy?
 - f. What process did they follow? Did they have a discussion first, assign roles, etc. then jump in knowing their methodology or did they just jump in and learn along the way?

- g. What contributed to chaos?
- h. What would they have done differently now with the benefit of hindsight?
- i. How does this exercise apply to everyday work challenges?
- j. Share some facts and discuss: Business school students on average are the worst performers, and conversely kindergarten students are the best performers. Ask them to guess why that is. Children are not afraid to try and experiment. They build multiple designs and try wild ideas. Many of their attempts collapse, there is repeated failure and chaos, if you will, but they learn about the problem and improve the solution as they go along. They are more comfortable with the stretch zone than most adults who have their own set ways!

ACTIVITY 5: BALLOON TOWER

1. **Set-up:** Put your participants into groups with an equal number of people. Give them the materials. (40-50 balloons and tape for each group) The teams can be close and can see how each one is getting on but do give them some space and scatter them around so they don't have full visibility of everyone's towers
2. **Task:** Create the tallest free-standing balloon structure using only the materials provided. You can only use the tape to anchor balloons to one another, not to the floor, table, ceiling, etc. Balloons may only be filled with air (no water!)
3. **Time:** 15 minutes
4. **Optional intervention (half-way):** All balloons of color of facilitator's choosing (choose a color that all teams seem to have used a similar number of to ensure fairness) are now considered defective and cannot be part of your structure. This also includes any little bits of balloon left over where you may have tied them together. Those balloons need to be removed from the structure before you can continue. Do not hand out any additional balloons
5. **Debrief:**
 - a. Discuss how it went generally. Hear what bubbles up.
 - b. Pull up the Comfort Zone - Stretch Zone - Panic Zone diagram. Discuss how they felt about stepping out of their comfort zone. Were they ever in the panic zone? What / who brought them back?



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- c. What was ambiguous? How did the interventions come into play?
- d. Who was the leader (if anyone)?
- e. What was their strategy?
- f. What process did they follow? Did they have a discussion first, assign roles, etc. then jump in knowing their methodology or did they just jump in and learn along the way?
- g. What contributed to chaos?
- h. What would they have done differently now with the benefit of hindsight?
- i. How does this exercise apply to everyday work challenges?

Feel free to get in touch at leadrisecoaching@gmail.com if you would like to ask any questions or share comments / thoughts, feedback or expressions of pure enthusiasm!