

“MUST TRY HARDER”



When Trying Harder Gets In The Way

It was a phrase that appeared regularly on my school reports, and one I have found myself thinking about time and again over the years.

At the time, these words, written and accepted, without much thought. Only later did I begin to consider what they really meant.

The message, I suppose, was straightforward enough. More effort was needed. There was something there, yet not quite being reached.

And perhaps that was true.

Looking back, I am not sure that trying harder, at least in the way it was intended, would have made much difference. I never quite settled into the rhythm of school. Sitting still,

focusing on things that did not hold my interest, trying to apply myself simply because I was told to. It was not that I could not do the work. More that I struggled to connect with it.

So the instruction remained. Try harder.

It is a familiar idea. When something is not working, the natural response is to add more effort. To concentrate more, to push a little more, to take tighter control.

Yet there are times when that instinct begins to work against us.

I have noticed it since, in different settings, with different people. In work, in sport, in situations where a certain level of competence has already been reached. The foundations are in place. The ability is there. But in the moment, something shifts.

The mind becomes busier. Instructions start to form. Adjust this. Focus on that. The body follows, tightening in response. Movements that would usually take care of themselves begin to feel directed. What was once straightforward becomes something to manage.

And often, performance drifts.

It made me think about where effort is best placed.

Preparation tends to respond well to it. Time spent learning, practising, refining. Quiet work, repeated often enough to become familiar. Standards built over time.

But performance itself seems to ask for something different. Not the addition of more effort in the moment, but the ability to draw on what has already been done.

There have been times when things have felt as they should. Not forced, not overthought. Just a sense of being fully engaged in what is happening, with a clear idea of what needs to be done, but without needing to guide every step. Those moments do not seem to come from trying harder. If anything, they appear when there is less interference.

Which makes the phrase worth reconsidering.

“Must try harder.”

Sometimes it may be right. There are occasions when more effort is needed.

But there are also times when the better question is not whether to try harder, but where that effort should sit. In the preparation, rather than the moment. In building the skill, rather than forcing the outcome.

And perhaps, from time to time, in trusting that what has been learned is already enough.

A Moment To Reflect

Where might you be trying too hard? Think of an activity, a relationship, or even a thought process where effort might be working against you. Are you trying too hard at the performance stage? Do you notice any tension in your mind, your body, or your emotions when you are in the middle of it?

If so, there is a good chance you are trying too hard. Can you take the pressure off, and simply let what happens, happen? Letting go of effort can feel uncomfortable. But if trying hard is not getting the job done, why not try letting go instead?

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