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**When divers on a technical dive become task-fixated, critical cues that warn them that their broader attention is needed can be missed. Psychologist and technical diver Matt Jevon discusses the effects and dangers of flow and task fixation in diving.**

Recently, while working my day job, I was at Heathrow Airport in London for three days to work with a group of very talented executives who ran a successful multinational company. My role was to enhance conversations, guide and challenge participants on strategy development and to get the board of directors working as a cohesive team on issues that challenged both themselves and the company.

One particular issue in the company had recently occupied the attention of the executives. Interestingly, it impacted heavily on the strategy discussions, introducing a bias in the importance on one

particular element. As a result, we set up a short team exercise, which was a simple task in appearance, but was actually difficult in practice, and challenged the team to solve it. Off they went.

Now, this team had a good balance

of thinking styles and approaches. Ten minutes of discussion and experimentation ought to have revealed the answer, and in fact, they did exactly that later in the day. However, immediately on being challenged with the task, the team

fell into a common trap, which catches many divers and dive teams as well: task fixation.

Because the answer appeared simple, the group failed to plan and failed to communicate, so the first attempt failed.

This brought a realisation that there was a more significant challenge here. Communication improved dramatically, and the team was cooperating now, but still not being cohesive. A couple of team members came up with a couple of ideas,



# *The Dangers of* **Task Fixation** *& How to Prevent It*

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good ideas, and the team went for them, without challenge!

This is not the way a high performance team operates. It should use the skills and approaches of each member to challenge and deconstruct ideas, so that by the time the implementation is due, the expertise of the group has ensured that the most likely solution is achieved.

### Dive team skills

In diving, we need to think carefully about the composition and skills of our dive team. (A future article here, for sure.) Once we have a cohesive team, then that team needs to plan for every conceivable eventuality. Rehearse the plans, practise the skills and communications, and then, if the pre-conceived incident occurs, roll out the response.

This process relies upon recognition of the cues that reveal a situation is emerging, which can be easily missed, if we over-

fixate on a task. It is not too complex to solve, though—it is just a question of developing some scanning techniques.

Where task fixation becomes really problematic is when we do not recognise the need to adjust and change on the fly. The critical cues that warn us our broader attention is needed can be missed.

For example, cell readings start to adjust at different rates to depth changes. Bubbles start moving sideways, signalling a current picking up. We miss a backup computer failure.

### Narrowing of focus

I was reading some of technical diver Bernie Chowdhury's accounts of dives on the wreck of the *Andrea Doria*. The times he and other very experienced wreck divers had incidents were all down to narrowing of focus, usually on the collection of artefacts—pushing penetrations to find the first-class crockery. One incident on recov-



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tion into a task, we can easily fall into the concept of flow, where time ceases to have meaning. For example, how many times have you done something (driven home, finished a project) that you think would take a few minutes, but all of a sudden, it is two hours later.

Flow, if you are in a safe environment, is awesome. If you are executing skills, it is tremendous. But if you are in a fluid, changing and hazardous environment, flow can be a killer. Never be surprised when you check your computer for run-time.

The next time your teammate pulls on your fin or flashes you a light, don't forget to thank them for ensuring you stay aware—they are making sure you stay alive.

Dive smart, dive aware, dive safe. ■

*A native of the Republic of Ireland, Matt Jevon, MSc., is an experienced and passionate open and closed circuit 100m trimix diver and full cave diver. Whether using backmount, sidemount or his favourite JJ-CCR rebreather, Jevon believes technical diving is all about being safe, having an awesome dive and enjoying experiences few people share. Jevon holds instructor qualifications from TDI, PADI TECREC and IANTD, and partly owns South West Tech—a TDI dive centre in Ireland. Jevon is also an approved JJ-CCR instructor and dealer. In addition, he is a sports psychologist, senior rugby coach and works in strategy and private equity. For more information, please visit: [Swf.ie](http://Swf.ie) and [Mattjevon.com](http://Mattjevon.com).*

ering plates resulted in an exit being lost due to silt stirred up by bagging the china.

As we sit here now, it is easy to realise that, of course, this would have happened. But it is a very different thing when one sits at 60m plus, in a small locker, inside a deep wreck, where the plates are piled high.

In this situation, one needs to concentrate to do well, so fixing on a task is good, to ensure its efficient and timely execution. But this requires a diver to place trust in his or her teammates.

So, the team needs to take up the scanning, looking for cues as to what the environment will throw at one next. If one does not have the team, then one needs to take personal responsibility for adopting a consistent scanning strategy.

## Checklist

It needs to be relevant, so re-

hearse it. Make a list, pop it in the wet notes... what do you need to check on the dive? Gas, time depth, pO<sub>2</sub> for sure. Navigation, current, temperature, guideline integrity, overhead safety—it's pretty easy. What else is there, though? Awareness of other divers—all good.

The simplest and easiest check, though, is to ask oneself:

- How long have I been doing what I am doing?
- Is it part of the plan?
- Have I been aware of the passage of time and is that relevant to the depth I am at?

This is simply the fastest way of checking to see if you are task-fixated.

## Flow can be a killer

When we invest our concentra-



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