

How We Lead

Practical Wisdom for Leaders and Coaches
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Practicing Leadership The Rule of 300/3000

Recently I introduced my coaching clients to a principle I call the Rule of 300/3000. It is one of the most important and least discussed principles in leadership development. I didn't invent the concept. I heard about it from Richard Strozzi-Heckler's book *Leadership Dojo* and then coined the expression. Here it is:

The Rule of 300/3000

- If you want to get good at something, you need to practice doing it over and over again.
- To be specific, it takes 300 repetitions to develop a bodily memory of a skill and 3000 repetitions to fully embody it.
- Therefore start practicing right now.

Example: learning to drive stick shift. When you first learn to drive a manual transmission car, shifting from first to second gear (or from second to third) is incredibly challenging. When do you push your left foot down? Can you time it with your right foot?

When do you move the gear? Does your hand even know which gear is where? Coordinating these movements is hard. As a result, initial attempts typically produce a combination of stalls, erratic acceleration, and multitudes of disturbing sounds coming from who-knows-where in the car. Do you know anyone who skipped this step in learning stick shift? I don't. This is why some people give up and switch to an automatic.

Those who persist require roughly 300 repetitions of shifting gears before they can smoothly coordinate their feet and hands once they have decided it's time to shift gears. In other words, after 300 repetitions, they can perform this task effortlessly once they choose to perform it. This is an achievement. Yet an experienced driver doesn't even think about when to switch gears. In fact, she typically isn't even aware of which gear she is in at any given moment. This is a higher order skill. Getting to this level requires an additional 2700 repetitions past the point of bodily memory, or 3000 repetitions in total. Hence the Rule of 300/3000.

How does this apply to leadership? Leadership involves a different mix of skills than driving a car (yes, even in organizations where everyone is "driving change"). It also calls for higher orders of cognitive, relational, and emotional complexity. Yet the equation, I assert, is the same. Consider the following examples:

- Publicly thanking direct reports for recent accomplishments. Do this 300 times, and you know how to appreciate skillfully once you've decided to do it. Do it 3000 times, and it's part of who you are.
- Communicating bad news to the CEO rather than filtering it out in favor of good news. After 300 repetitions, you can do this comfortably albeit with effort and consternation. After 3000 repetitions, you do it effortlessly.
- Being grounded and centered when problems arise and emotions are high. After you've practiced your response to the 300th problem, you know how to ground and center your body once you set your mind to it. After the 3000th problem, you do this naturally.
- Speaking more succinctly in executive-level meetings. 300 repetitions give you bodily memory. After 3000 repetitions, you're a natural.

- Delegating more effectively by making clear and direct requests that include timeframes and conditions for satisfaction. It takes 300 requests to do it smoothly. It takes 3000 requests to do it without having to think about it.

Leaders I work with get energized by the Rule of 300/3000 because it captures two dimensions of their experience:

1. It has taken hard work and a lot of practice to get to where they are today in their careers. I asked one executive, "So how did you get so good at giving presentations to large groups?" Her reply: "Because I did a gazillion of them." At the time, she had considered speeches part of her job, something she had anticipated with either dread or excitement depending on the situation and her mood. In retrospect, she saw that she had been practicing an important skill.
2. Taking their leadership to the next level isn't an overnight process. Even after practicing delegation for six months, one executive still gets feedback that his requests are not always clear. The Rule of 300/3000 offers an explanation: you've only practiced 1423 times. You are exactly where you should be after 1423 repetitions. Keep it up. This message is comforting—it protects against the inner critic—

and inspiring—it creates a powerful challenge for the future.

So what are you practicing today?

Great. And how many times did you practice it?

The reason frequency matters is simple math:

- If you practice three times a day, you will develop bodily memory in three months and embodiment in three years. This is actually quite a solid pace.
- What if you practice only once a day? Nine months to bodily memory and nine years to embodiment.
- Some leaders think once a week is enough. That's fine, but they'll be practicing for six years until they have bodily memory, and it will take nearly sixty years for embodiment.

Perhaps this is the real reason why formal executive education—even six-week classes—often fails to produce higher-quality leadership: not enough real-world (or even simulated) practice opportunities!

This also can explain why the so-called 70/20/10 Rule makes sense to most managers and is a wonderful guide for anyone designing leadership development experiences. (The 70/20/10 Rule says that you get 70 percent of learning from on-the-job experience, 20 percent from hanging around mentors and other role models, and 10 percent from classroom training and books.) It makes sense because we get better at things we practice on-the-job, consciously, and with a genuine intent toward excellence.

Here's what I'm practicing today and my estimate of the practice count:

- Eating six small meals each day that have sufficient protein—6 repetitions
- Writing about leadership—175 repetitions
- Strengthening my muscles by working out at the gym (today it's legs and abs)—250 repetitions
- Completing 2-minute-or-less tasks in my inbox right away rather than deferring them—350 repetitions
- Pointing out to my clients specific examples of progress they have made—550 repetitions

- Completing a daily 40-minute practice of stretching, yoga, tai chi and deep relaxation to relax, ground and center my body–1800 repetitions
- Brushing my teeth–over 25,000 repetitions

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