

How We Lead

Practical Wisdom for Leaders and Coaches

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THREE STORIES OF PRACTICING LEADERSHIP

In the September issue I made the case that leadership excellence grows through deliberate practice. In this issue I'd like to ground that assessment with several examples.

But first, a quick refresher on the attributes of deliberate practice. You will recall that it **(a)** is designed specifically to improve performance, **(b)** can be repeated at high volume, **(c)** involves continuous feedback from a teacher or coach, **(d)** requires intense concentration, and **(e)** may not always be fun.

Let me also make a distinction between practices and habits. (*Thank you, Dr. D, for the reminder to do this*). Practices are conscious. Habits are not. If you tend to signal to others that you agree with them when inside you don't--and you're not aware you're doing this, at least until much later--I would call this a habit. On the other hand, if you are consciously speaking up when you see things differently, even when this feels uncomfortable, I would call this a practice. All of us go through the day with dozens, if not hundreds, of habits that vary in their impact on our leadership. I often ask leaders to observe those habits in order to develop more freedom to respond. It's part one of rewiring the brain. Then and only then do I ask them to practice something new. With enough repetition, that new practice becomes--yes, you guessed it--a habit.

If we've designed the practice skillfully, it fosters excellence, meaning, and engagement. For example:

- I. **Drew** (a composite of two people) has been a senior manager for twenty years. He is known for accomplishing big things, staying positive, and giving polished presentations. He works hard and is proud of his feats. However, interviews reveal that most people who work with him feel like they don't really know him and sometimes wonder about his sincerity. Is this what he really feels or is this just for show? This assessment hits Drew hard, but after significant reflection he acknowledges that he actually doesn't know what he's feeling most of the time, so how could others? After a couple of months of observing his own emotions and learning the language of emotion (sadness, fear, irritation, contentment, disgust, delight, etc.), he starts to practice a new way of speaking. To be specific, he starts to practice speaking authentically, which includes revealing what he is feeling. It's not easy--after all, he is a beginner at this--but over time he gets the hang of it and even starts to enjoy it. How do others respond? At first, they're not sure what to think. Drew sure is acting strangely. (This is a common reaction when we change, even in ways other desire). But when they see this behavior more consistently, they begin to appreciate it. I really know where he's coming from. He feels real. As others trust Drew's sincerity more, they more readily sign onto his visions and give him their best.
- II. **Gina** (also a composite) is super-smart and a rising leader in a Fortune 100 company. Her greatest asset is discernment. She can pinpoint what's missing in a plan or strategy and suggest how to improve it. She also takes care of her staff and is widely respected for her competence and integrity. Yet, like Drew, she has what I call an Achilles Heel: she can be publicly critical of others' ideas and even dismissive of them as individuals. This is particularly true with peers, several of whom tell me she has an "attitude" and is "hard to work with because you never

know what she's going to say about you." When hearing this assessment, Gina readily agrees that it sounds like her. On a deeper level, we discover that the voice inside her head that can be critical of others is actually brutal toward herself. This "inner critic" is part pit bull, part sniper, and always on the attack. After observing it in action for a few weeks, she takes on two new practices: keeping a list of what she is grateful for that day and doing a physical movement that makes her body more flexible. Over time, these practices quiet her inner critic and help her accept others' flaws and mistakes. She rebuilds two key relationships that were on the rocks and builds a more positive public identity in the company.

- III. In 1997 **Shawn Green** (real name, but not someone I've coached) is a talented Major League baseball player who is frustrated by being benched. Not only that, but after a confrontation with the team's batting coach, he is prohibited from going to the batting cage without the coach's supervision--an insulting restriction. Rather than sulk in resentment and resignation, Shawn starts a new practice. He finds a batting tee and net in a little-used area outside the clubhouse and starts hitting by himself. (Batting tees are not how pros practice). He visualizes game situations and pretends "I was facing all of the pitchers I was currently being forced to watch from the dugout...[and] notice[s] the sound of the ball swishing against the back net." His mind quiets and his breathing "becomes rhythmic." He repeats this batting meditation every day. In his first at bat after being placed in the lineup, he hits a home run against the great pitcher, Greg Maddux. Within a month, his batting average has increased by sixty points. At first teammates tease him about traveling with a tee but over time they gain respect for this unorthodox practice. In the coming years, he adds other deliberate practices like improving his stride by "imagining with my foot and shoulder" and anticipating pitches by carefully watching individual pitchers and keeping a journal of their patterns. The result? A fifteen year career with a lifetime .280 batting average and over 300 home runs, including four homers in a single game (a record). For more, see his wonderful book *The Way of Baseball: Finding Stillness at 95 MPH*.

A few lessons from these stories:

- Sometimes the practices that evoke excellence are unusual and at first uncomfortable.
- Others may have judgments about the practices. So may we.
- A good set of practices draws upon the body, heart and mind.
- When the practices are well-designed, the results speak for themselves. Judgment morphs into respect.

Enjoy the practicing and let me know how it's going.

Cheers,

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