

How We Lead

Practical Wisdom for Leaders and Coaches
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By Amiel Handelsman

WHAT ARE YOU PRACTICING TODAY?

What's the one thing you can do today...and tomorrow...and the day after that...to be a better leader?

There may be no more important question to ask.

And it's not as simple as it sounds. I'm asking you to identify the one action that, if practiced every day, will have the largest impact on your capacity to make a positive difference in the world through people. Yes, we're talking about leverage, and of a very particular kind: leverage through practice.

We don't talk a lot about practice in organizations. Sure, we use the term "best practices," but not in the same sense as we practice sports or the performing arts. So let me define the word "practice"--more specifically, deliberate practice--with some help from Geoff Colvin, author of *Talent is Overrated*. A deliberate practice is one with the following attributes:

- a) It is designed specifically to improve performance. Note the word design. This is not something we just fall into. It's something we--or someone else--design to improve sharply defined elements of performance.
- b) It can be repeated at high volume.
- c) We receive continuous feedback from a teacher or coach.
- d) It requires intense focus and concentration.
- e) It may not always be fun.

OK, now that we have a definition, does this sound like anything you have in your life today?

Maybe a sport like golf or tennis. Perhaps a hobby like woodworking, painting or writing.

Great, now how about something in your role as a leader?

If so, send me a note because I'd love to hear about it.

If not, I want to assure you that my intent in asking this is not to club you over the head with my metaphorical bat: *Practicing is really, really good, so not practicing is really, really bad.*

That's not the point, nor is it true or helpful. Instead, what I'm doing is inviting you to share my amazement at the situation. Everyone wants better leaders. We invest tons of money and time in developing them. Yet rarely do we employ the very thing that consistently produces excellence in other domains of life.

And if we do, we do it partially. We practice listening to understand rather than to prepare our rebuttal, but we do this only on the third Tuesday of the month. Or we practice using stories to invite people into a new future but never get feedback from a competent teacher or coach on our presence or delivery. And so on.

I'd love to provide quantitative data to back up my point ("only 8.7% of leaders have a deliberate practice they repeat at high volume with feedback"), but I haven't seen any. Have you? I imagine not, and here's why: few have asked the question.

Most of my clients are up to their heads in data about competencies, strengths, and weaknesses (some of it useful as far as it goes). But often I'm the first person they've met in 25 years on the job who actually asks them to practice something regularly in a focused and deliberative manner.

Now for some good news:

- **Experience.** Many of us know how to practice. It's how we learned sports or music.
- **Humility.** Performance reviews, feedback from others and a gnawing sense that we are not using our potential--these keep us hungry to learn.
- **Access.** We have access to more wisdom about more domains of practice than any generation has had in human history. Once we know what to look for, we can find detailed descriptions with photos in an instant. For example, if you want to learn how to read emotions from facial expressions, Paul Ekman (*Emotions Revealed*) will show you how.
- **Guidance.** Teachers and coaches abound. Sometimes they're a ways away. Sometimes they're right in front of us.

It works. Stay tuned for examples in our next issue.

Cheers,

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