
Our Best Leaders = Your Best Leadership

What makes some leaders better than others and what can we learn from the best?

by Paul Otte, Franklin University Leadership Center

How many of us have marveled at the skills demonstrated by an athlete, musician, or any other professional? Surely, what separates one individual from another must be their level of talent. Belief in talent as the differentiator allows the rest of us to sit and watch as others perform.

Does talent also apply to leadership? Is it what makes one leader more successful than another? Are some born to be leaders, while others follow? To answer these questions we looked at talent in greater depth. What we have found might surprise you.

Talent, experience, and practice

In his popular book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell explores what makes people successful. What do they have in common? – *The 10,000-Hour Rule*, Gladwell tells us. He refers to the studies of K. Anders Ericsson who found that “once a musician has enough ability to get into a top music school, the thing that distinguishes one performer from another is how hard he or she works.”¹ The very best (in many professions) report 10,000 hours of practice.

But it isn’t experience alone. Ericsson and others tell us that practice is more than just “being there.” And certain types of practice are more effective. Ericsson, who studied expertise in areas like sports, chess, and music, finds that what matters most - more than experience (or even “raw” talent) - is what he calls “deliberate practice,” repeatedly doing the most difficult tasks (physical for the athlete, intricate patterns for the chess player, and unconscious thinking for the musician). To Ericsson practice should never get easier. If it does, you are not getting better.

Do Ericsson’s findings apply in other areas? Others say they do. Most notably (for leaders) is Geoff Colvin who’s (Fortune Magazine) article *Why Talent is Overrated*² discusses Ericsson’s concept of deliberate practice in depth and concludes that the “findings do not prove that talent doesn’t exist. But they do suggest an intriguing possibility: that if it does, it may be irrelevant.” Colvin uses specific examples from business to reinforce his beliefs.

Colvin tells us that “deliberate practice is a specific and unique kind of activity . . . characterized by several elements that together form a powerful whole.” He identifies eight characteristics of deliberate practice:

- Deliberate practice is designed specifically to improve performance – it involves continually stretching an individual beyond his or her current abilities.
- Deliberate practice can be repeated a lot.
- Feedback on results is continuously available.
- It’s highly demanding mentally – it requires focus and concentration.

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- It's hard – it means that most people won't do it. So your willingness to do it will distinguish you from others.
 - Before the work – the best performers set goals that are not about the outcome but rather about the process of reaching the outcome.
 - During the work – the best performers are able to monitor what is happening in their own minds and how it is going (meta-cognition – thinking about your own thinking).
 - After the work – practice activities are worthless without useful feedback about the results - a self evaluation against a relevant (stretch) standard.

Gladwell, Ericsson, and Colvin are not alone in their emphasis on practice. Educators use the term “reflective practice” to describe applying knowledge to practice through one's own experiences. Richard Elmore³ and others in education have linked reflective practice to school leadership and student learning. My personal favorite is *The Talent Code*⁴, written by Daniel Coyle who takes talent and practice even further. Relying on amazing findings from the fascinating (to me) new world of neuroplasticity, Coyle tells us how “deep practice” changes the brain, by creating myelin.⁵

Deep practice, Coyle says, means “operating at the edges of your ability, where you make mistakes. Experiences where you are forced to slow down, make errors, and correct them make you better without your realizing it.” He says “deep practice is a conscious act. It requires energy, passion, and commitment.” Coyle provides “Three Rules of Deep Practice. One: Chunk it up – absorb the whole thing, break it into chunks, slow it down. Two: Repeat it. Three: Learn to feel it (being aware of what you are doing).”

Leadership practice

Although I am fascinated by deliberate, reflective, and deep practice, the concepts behind them are not completely new to me. In my discussions with one of the best leaders - General Gray (the 29th Commandant of the Marine Corps) - he seems to have intuitively understood and applied these concepts throughout his career. For example, in discussing exercises and critiques (the military equivalent of practice), he frequently says “I don't want to know what you did. I want to know what you were thinking and feeling - your thought process.”

Also consider the higher levels of leadership themes we (Gray and Otte) proposed in *The Conflicted Leader and Vantage Leadership*.⁶ These leadership themes both support, and are supported by, the practice concepts we have explored. *Learning to live with uncertainty, without creating certainty and seeing the possible (over the probable)* both challenge and stretch a leader's abilities. *Thinking conceptually* is a thought process and having a *sense of presence* is another way of learning to feel it. And *commitment*, we are told is a requirement of practice.

At this point (our “ah-ha” moment) in our search for the answers to - *Does talent also apply to leadership? Is it what makes one leader more successful than another? Are some born to be leaders, while others follow?* - we reversed the process. We had found how practice, not talent, makes people better and how deep practice may be best. The next step was to work backwards, applying what we had learned about practice to what we know about leaders and leadership.

Based on observations, analysis, and review of the resources in our Leadership Center⁷, with a special emphasis on those we consider the best leaders, we have been able to not only answer our questions but we also developed our own principles for leadership practice, along with concepts and ideas for implementing them, all built on what we have learned from real leaders, practicing real leadership.

What have we learned from our intuitive research⁸? Not surprising, most leaders have accumulated many hours (well in excess of 10,000) in their leadership positions. Most, if not all, have read books on leadership, attended conferences, and listened to others talk about leadership, in addition to just doing it on a daily basis. While some might suggest they had a natural tendency towards leadership, all seem to echo Colvin’s conclusion that “it may be irrelevant.”

The best leaders we found have become better from highly demanding mental practice, requiring focus and concentration. What distinguishes the best leaders from the others isn’t their talent, but their willingness to set stretch goals, monitor, and (self) evaluate their progress. They may not call it deliberate, or reflective, practice but they share examples of facing challenges, overcoming obstacles, and learning from what they did, especially their mistakes. And the more they practiced their leadership, it seems the faster they became a “best” leader.

Leadership unlike sports and music, however, doesn’t typically allow for a set period of time to practice before the actual “game,” or “performance.” Leadership is most often practiced “on-the-job,” while in the process of actually leading others. Therefore, our leadership practice principles are “hands-on” concepts that can be applied while leading. They go beyond reading, or listening (a passive activity), to doing and practice (actively thinking and feeling). They might appear to be the same things you are already doing, but look further and you will find leadership practice requires doing them in a different (deliberate, reflective, and deeper) way.

Our leadership practice principles

What can we learn about leadership practice from the best leaders? Is there a leadership equivalent to “deep practice?” We think there is. Following Coyle’s “Deep Practice Rules,” we absorbed our Leadership Center’s resources, broke the presentations and our observations of leaders into chunks, learned to feel it, and with “energy, passion, and commitment” identified four principles of (deep) leadership practice; **continually stretching, consciously thinking, doing openly, and developing others.** If followed, we believe they can make you a better leader and if repeated (often enough) they will make you one of the best leaders.

Continually Stretching – simply stated, the best leaders bring more to the leadership process. They have a wide range of interests and find opportunities to bring the knowledge they acquire from their inquisitiveness to their leadership. Based on our observations, they look at things differently, practicing their leadership in unusual ways. Practicing doesn't make leadership easier for them, but it does make them better leaders. In a world that seems to be more and more specialized, the best leaders continually stretch themselves by remaining open to new ideas and new sources of knowledge.

Consciously Thinking – without looking, think about the face of your watch. How many numbers are on it? Now look. Most people do not know the correct answer. Why? Because when doing the routine (looking at our watches), we tend not to think beyond the immediate (the time). We don't know if the best leaders know the numbers on their watches, or not, but we do know they are better at consciously thinking. Whether it is practicing General Gray's "thought process," Colvin's "during the work" (meta-cognition), or Coyle's "learn to feel it," the best leaders (we have studied) are acutely aware of their thinking, monitoring their process, and evaluating their results consciously.

Doing Openly – this principle of leadership practice includes both the concepts of doing and doing it openly. Leadership is not a spectator sport. As already noted, you will not get better solely by reading about it, or listening to leaders share their philosophies. Both leadership and practice begin by doing. Remember Yoda's advice to Luke - "*Try not. Do. Or do not. There is no try.*"⁹ Especially true for today's leader who not only must do, but do more, and more (often with less and less).

The best leaders we have observed not only do, but they do what they do openly. As General Gray says, "tell them what you are going to do, tell them again, and then tell them one more time." Why? Because if people are aware of what you are doing, your intent and desired end state, along with your leadership philosophy, they can provide the advice you need before, during, and after (critiquing) your doing. Practice requires doing and practicing your leadership with the help of others not only improves you, but also develops others.

Developing others – the best way to practice leadership (or anything else) is by teaching it to others. You might expect such a bias from a teacher, but based on our observations, we have found the best leaders are also the best teachers. Helping others to learn strengthens your leadership, but how you teach them is as important as what. The best leaders build on strengths, set high expectations, create a mutual respect, and provide opportunities for leadership, early and often.

In addition to these four principles of (deep) leadership practice, we have identified several concepts and ideas to further explain and guide you in applying each of them. Do the leaders we observed practice each of the principles and guidelines? It's highly doubtful. These principles result from our "intuitive research" and many of the leaders we have observed may not be consciously aware they are practicing leadership. The best of the leaders, we believe, practice many of the concepts. The better leaders practice some.

Like any form of practice, each person may feel more comfortable with and focus on one, or more, of the principles. Some concepts will be harder for some people. Remember Coyle's characteristics of deliberate practice – "It's hard – it means that most people won't do it. So your willingness to do it will distinguish you from others." The more principles and guidelines you practice and the more often, the more likely you will become one of the best leaders.

"If you only have a hammer, you tend to see every problem as a nail." - Abraham Maslow

Continually Stretching – concepts and ideas

- ✓ Sphere of interest (expanding your leadership resources)
- ✓ Leadership lens (finding leadership in the usual and unusual)
- ✓ Suspending judgment (developing leadership opportunities)

Ericsson says practice is "repeatedly doing the most difficult tasks." To him it should never get easier. If it does, you are not getting better. Colvin notes "it involves continually stretching an individual beyond his or her current abilities" and Coyle says it means "operating at the edges of your ability." All seem to agree, practice requires stretching yourself. In leadership, we stretch ourselves (practice) by being open to new ideas, as well as new sources of knowledge.

Sphere of interest - Your sphere of interest represents everything you are willing to (or feel a need to) pay attention to and learn about. It goes beyond the things you are required to know to include the things you want to know. It includes what you think about. And the more you think about and become interested in something, the more likely you are to learn more about it. On the other hand, your sphere of influence includes only those things you have the capability to affect. The things you have the authority and responsibility to impact (directly or indirectly) are in your sphere of influence.

As you might expect, the things you are interested in can be much broader than those you can influence. In today's rapidly changing world, the farther ahead you think (expanding your sphere of interest), the better prepared you will be. Many leaders seek first to expand their influence (through promotions with more authority and responsibility), but the best leaders begin by expanding their sphere of interest to assure that they are ready (and knowledgeable) when opportunities arise.

Think of your sphere of interest as a way to expand your leadership resources. A broad sphere of interest often results from a sense of inquisitiveness. A "busy" leader may feel there isn't time to explore new ideas, be involved in new activities, but a better leader knows it is time well spent. It is an investment in your (leadership) future. Listen to the presentations in our Leadership Center and you will find the best leaders not only have expanded spheres of interest, but they practice applying what they learn from their broad interests directly to their leadership.

The best leaders we have observed are generally voracious readers and acquirers of new knowledge. And, as a result, they incorporate elements from their wide range of interests into their leadership philosophies. The stories they tell often provide vivid examples of their ability to make connections between their spheres of interest and their leadership. And you make connections through your leadership lens.

Leadership lens - General Gray tells us – “*Want a new idea – read an old book.*” The key is in how you look at the things around you. In our Leadership Institutes we have developed an activity - *Finding Leadership in the Usual and Unusual Places*. The participant’s challenge is to find leadership in an everyday activity (not one normally seen as involving leadership), in a book (not about leadership), and in a children’s book (which they easily find is truly about leadership by looking at it through a new lens). Your leadership lens is your ability to see leadership in both the usual and unusual and it is developed through practice.

The best leaders seem to have “wide angle” leadership lenses that capture leadership in a wide variety of settings and activities. In their presentations, they frequently tell stories about how they learned (practiced) a valuable leadership lesson in a situation that others in leadership positions might have easily missed. It is this ability to not only see, but also to relate what they do to how they can be a better leader that sets them apart. By continually stretching their leadership lens their library of leadership resources is greatly expanded.

Suspending judgment - In addition to creating their leadership lens and expanding their spheres of interest, the best leaders seem particularly adept at suspending their judgment. This concept comes from the work of Edward DeBono, a leader in the field of creative thinking. DeBono discusses two ways of thinking; vertically and laterally. In vertical thinking (the most common way) we process information sequentially - assuring that each item is consistent with the item that precedes it. In contrast, lateral thinkers suspend their judgment allowing them to explore more options (without looking for consistency) and ultimately find opportunities that others could not (seeing the possible over the probable).

While it is doubtful that the best leaders have ever heard of DeBono, or vertical and lateral thinking, it is obvious (by observing their behaviors) that they do have a greater ability to suspend their judgment and they practice it more than other leaders. Perhaps it is an outgrowth of their inquisitiveness, their leadership lens, their expanded spheres of interest, and their continually stretching.

You can practice continually stretching by changing your way of looking at the things around you, expanding your leadership lens. Practice looking at familiar things in new ways. By driving to work in a new way, you will see new things. The same applies to how you see the people and things around you. To widen your leadership lens look for and learn from the unusual. The activities in our Leadership Institutes are based on the belief “*If you develop your leadership only from the usual sources, you will most likely be the usual leader.*”

You can expand your sphere of interest, or you may feel you already have a wide range of interests. The key is to practice transferring the knowledge you acquire from your interests by applying it to your leadership. Practicing suspending judgment may be more difficult because we spend most of our time thinking vertically, not laterally. Remember, the harder something is, the fewer people will do it. Doing it will distinguish you from others.

Personally, I have been fortunate to have been exposed to leadership in a variety of settings. Serving on community and business boards has broadened my knowledge of other industries and business models. They have, without exception, provided concepts and ideas (examples of successes and failures) that I have applied and practiced in my “everyday” leadership. In many ways, I think I may have learned the most about leadership through my daughter and observing the children (including my own granddaughters) in her childcare center. Children, I have learned may be the best leaders. They see the possible and challenge their assumptions.

My interest in creativity and the brain (neuroplasticity) led me to my readings about talent which I have been able to apply (hopefully you will agree) to leadership. Even my avocation over the years, magic, has given me great insights into how people think which has been a great asset in helping others see the possible. Many magic tricks, I have learned, often rely on people’s preference for thinking vertically (seeking closure) and can be more easily understood if you learn to think laterally (suspending judgment). And it has been a rare book (on any topic) that hasn’t challenged my leadership thought process in some way.

“I don’t want to know what you did. I want to know what you were thinking and feeling – your thought process.” - General Gray

Consciously Thinking – concepts and ideas

- ✓ Thinking on the “run” (evaluating, making adjustments along the way)
- ✓ Critiques (learning from successes as well as failures)
- ✓ Simplicity (capturing the essence; making it easy to understand)

While there are similarities in each of the approaches to practice discussed above, there are also some (maybe subtle, but important) differences. The 10,000 Hour Rule, proposed by Gladwell, leaves you with the impression the more hours of practice, the better one becomes. Ericsson’s deliberate practice involves repeatedly doing the most difficult tasks. Colvin echoes the difficulty of the task, but he also tells us the best performers – think about their thinking.

This element of thinking is also included in General Gray’s asking – *tell me your thought process*. In deep practice, Coyle takes the idea of thinking even further. He says deep practice is a conscious act. His rules include - Learn to feel it (being aware of what you are doing). For me, that means deep practice is done in the present – the conscious mind.

Thinking on the “run” - Coyle uses running as an example. Consider the following (my interpretation of Coyle’s example): a long distance runner wanting to get better will often run many miles during a week. For many, the purpose of running (practice) is to build endurance (distance). Because this can be a boring (unconscious) exercise, some will listen to music along the way. Others, to pace themselves, will talk to others. To add a challenge to the practice, some daily runs will be longer than others.

But in deep practice, Coyle tells us, runners learn to “feel it.” Each time their foot hits the ground, they are checking their position, evaluating, making adjustments as necessary along the way (not just in pace, but in each motion). Deep practice means slowing it down (in your mind, not your pace), being consciously aware of the smallest detail that to others might be overlooked. As a result, deep practice is even more about how you practice (thinking on the “run”) than it is about how long.

Think about how this could apply to leadership. We already said to become a better leader requires practice. Hours of practicing leadership can make you a good leader, thinking about how you lead (before or after) can make you a better leader, and consciously thinking (while you are leading) can make you the best leader. The best leaders think on the “run.” It not only maximizes their learning but also allows them to make simple changes earlier in their thought process.

We have observed the best leaders thinking on the run in meetings and discussions with them. They are often the most active listeners and questioners. You can see it in their non-verbal behaviors – they are engaged, leaning forward, focused on others, while maintaining eye (and thought) contact. If you look close enough, you might even see them absorbing the whole thing, breaking it into chunks, slowing it down, learning to “feel it,” consciously thinking and critiquing.

Critiques - As stated above, exercises and critiques are the military equivalent of practice. Military exercises (some call them war games) are used for testing strategies and tactics. They can involve thousands of troops, employed over wide areas. Some have been full-scale field rehearsals of planned military operations. Exercises are then followed by critiques. In the Marine Corps, a critique involves “taking the rank off,” as Marines at all levels are asked (and expected) to provide their honest feedback, going beyond what was done, with the emphasis on why and “*what you were thinking and feeling – your thought process* (General Gray).”

Although few non-military organizations would have the need (or the resources) for large scale exercises, leaders in all sectors could benefit from practicing critiques. The military critique their successes as well as their failures. The best leaders learn from both. Taking the rank off means everyone’s input is not only solicited, but also equally respected. Those closest to any situation, generally have the best view. Remember, to place the emphasis on why, not what was done. The key is to find out what people were thinking and feeling, avoiding what some have characterized as “shooting the wounded.”

“I would not give a fig for the simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity.” - Oliver Wendell Holmes

Simplicity - It's easy to make things complex, but difficult to make them simple. Practicing simplicity will make you a better leader, accomplishing it can make you one of the best leaders. You can find it in the best leaders' presentations. They make their philosophies easy to understand. While many rely on elaborate PowerPoint presentations, the best engage in what seems to be more of an informal conversation. They talk with you, not at you.

While some use the complex and elaborate, along with formality as paths to power, Jeff Hawkins, the inventor of the Palm Pilot and Treo, says “the most powerful ideas are simple.”¹⁰ The best leaders would agree.

The best leaders, we have found, are able to look at a situation (a report, presentation, concept, or idea) and immediately capture its essence. The French have a term for it, most frequently used in a military context, *coup d'oeil* (pronounced koo doy). “It is the inspiration – the hunch- upon which a leader begins to conceptualize the situation.”¹¹

“Critical to developing coup d'oeil is the study of history. Through it we see how successful leaders thought through the situations facing them.” – Tactics, USMC.

Not surprising, many of the best leaders we have observed have acquired a great appreciation for the historical context behind what they do, believe, and practice. They study the history of their business and their profession (industry). As a result, they gain a great sense of their own presence, both in time and in place. They recognize, acknowledge, and learn from the leaders that have preceded them. They know (unless they are the founder) their organizations did not begin with, nor (if they are successful) will they end with, them.

You can practice consciously thinking by first thinking about your thinking - what you are doing and most importantly, why you are doing it. Consciously thinking is built on active listening and questioning, creating a two-way thinking process. Thinking on the run can be more difficult than thinking before, or after, but it is well worth practicing. Practice your leadership by critiquing your successes as well as your failures. Seek and respect the input of others – asking them what they were thinking and feeling (not doing). Practice looking for the essence (*coup d'oeil*) in every situation. How will you know when you achieve conscious thinking? When you find what you do results not in complexity, but its opposite – simplicity.

“It is the obligation of any leader to try to learn from the successes and failures of leaders from the past.” - Rudy Guiliani¹²

Doing Openly concepts and ideas

- ✓ Leadership philosophies (openly sharing your ideals and ideas)
- ✓ Leading by examples (storytelling by you and about you)
- ✓ To-Dos (a leadership practice “scorecard”)

Leaders do. They don't try. Better leaders get more done by involving others and the best leaders engage people by sharing their intent and desired end state, while seeking and respecting the advice of others. The best leaders (and those whose thinking is consistent with our higher levels of leadership themes) set higher level goals and/or achieve them quicker.

“The word that best captures the essence of leadership is communication.” – Bob Bailey

As noted above, the leadership practice principle of doing openly includes both the concepts of doing and doing openly and that happens by communicating with others. Communications is a pervasive leadership skill, but in the context of leadership practice it takes on more specific purposes; to improve the input and advice you receive from others before, during, and after doing (practicing leadership) and to share with others your leadership philosophy.

For their feedback to be the most effective, others need to be told not only what you plan to do (the end state), but also why (the intent) and the process you plan to follow before you begin. Think about magic (remember it's my avocation). A magician doesn't share with the audience what is about to happen in fear that it will expose how the trick works. Instead, they have you focus on something else. Magicians call it misdirection. But in leadership, there should be no misdirection. If others don't know your intent, they cannot capture and share with you what they were thinking and feeling, their thought process, which is critical for your leadership practice.

Leadership philosophies - Another purpose of communicating as part of doing openly is to share your leadership philosophy with those you lead. Mention having a philosophy and some will immediately think of the great philosophers (Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Nietzsche, and Kant, just to show I can name a few) and may be intimidated by the thought of having, or creating, their own philosophy of leadership. Add to this that most presentations on leadership are by CEO, presidents, and other leaders in higher level positions and it's easy to get the impression that only great leaders have a leadership philosophy. Not true, based on our observations. We believe the sooner in your practice of leadership that you develop your philosophy and share it with those you lead, the more likely you are, or will become, a higher level leader (in thinking and position).

In our Leadership Institutes we define philosophy simply as a sum of ideals and a system of ideas. Our participants, building on their own definitions of leadership, share their philosophies of leadership with us (some are included in our Center's leadership resources). Many who have listened to them have commented that these leadership philosophies are among the best. But more importantly, we have heard from many of the presenters that sharing their leadership philosophies with the people they lead is an important part of their leadership practice - doing what they do openly.

One leader¹³, we have observed, selects a concept, idea, or ideal every morning that he will practice all day. He writes it down and wears it on his shirt, openly letting others know and inviting them to hold him accountable for accomplishing it. He says it has helped him create a special bond with people who look for him to see what he is focusing on that day. When asked if others have adopted the practice, he says no, but it clearly doesn't stop his enthusiasm and commitment. He has been doing it for years, leading by his example.

Leadership by examples - The best leaders not only lead by their example, they use examples (stories) to create an emotional bond (engagement) with the people they lead. When you listen to leadership presentations, practice your own leadership by focusing on the stories they tell. Their stories will help you to remember their philosophies. Stories are excellent ways to communicate and reinforce values and beliefs. They are a way to share with others your thought process. Stories can also communicate who you are, as well as reinforce your organization's mission and values.

Storytelling is an art that is worth practicing. The best stories can create an emotional link with others. They must be real and relevant to be effective. The best leaders not only tell stories, but people tell stories about them.

Where will you find your leadership stories? What are the best stories? The larger your sphere of interest, the greater will be your resources for stories. The best stories are based on your experiences. Your leadership lens can create connections between what you do, hear, and see and your leadership. The wider your lens, the greater your ability will be to make a story relevant to others and your leadership. The more you are able to suspend your judgment, the more likely you will be to see leadership stories in the usual and unusual. Everyone has stories to tell, the key is making them personal, emotional, and relevant to your message.

Practicing thinking on the run will not only expand your source of stories, but will guide you in selecting the right story, for the right point, at the right time. Finding the essence in any situation allows you to create simple stories. Too long of a story will lose many listeners. Stories without a purpose are seldom remembered. Stories are also an excellent way to create a setting open to critiquing. Telling stories of past failures, as well as successes, demonstrates your openness for honest input, advice, and criticism. People's willingness to tell you that you made a mistake is often tied to you admitting that you make them.

“If you want work well done, find a busy man; the other kind has no time.” – Elbert Hubbard

To-dos – Despite all the technology available today, many leaders still rely on “old fashioned” to-do lists where they record the things that they need to do, often in some form of priority order. Even if you do not use an actual to-do list, chances are you record in some way the things that you need, or want, to do. Periodically reviewing the listing can be a good indicator (scorecard) of your level of leadership practice.

Better leaders do more, the best leaders do more of the right things, and they spend less time talking about it. I will always remember my first meeting with the then Board Chair at Franklin University, General Raymond Mason, Jr. After only weeks at the University, I found myself sitting in his office and telling him, “I was busy.” At which point he sat back in his chair and in a voice that sounded like it was coming from the artillery that he had commanded, he said “you know it never amazes me how people who say they are busy, take the time to talk about it.” From that day forward, I have never told anyone that I was busy, preferring instead to let the results speak for me.

In our Leadership Institutes, often in response to a participant’s claim about being too busy to accomplish something, I ask – as a leader, how many hours a day are you responsible for? Not surprising the answers typically range from 8 to 12 hours, with some going even higher, and an occasional (often desperate) response of 24 hours. Then I ask them how many people they are responsible for? Many quickly see the point – as a leader you are responsible for every hour spent by the people who work for you, as well as your own. Viewed in this way, the answer is often in the hundreds and even thousands of hours per day. And the point is, no matter how “busy” you are, you are judged on how effectively your people are using their hours.

Armed with what may be a new perspective, look at your to-do list in a new way - as a scorecard for your leadership practice. What types of things are you doing? Is there any indication of a broad sphere of interest? Does it include just the usual or are there unusual activities listed, as well? Are you more often stretching yourself, or just maintaining the status quo? Do you just cross things off when completed, or do you record (critiquing) what you have learned in the process? Are there any indicators of what you thought, or felt, as you were doing? Does your list include developing others and responding to their needs, or are you spending your time focused mainly on your wants?

Developing Others – concepts and ideas

- ✓ Strengths (identifying , building on, and engaging)
- ✓ L/Leader (raising expectations and providing early opportunities)
- ✓ Teacher and Scholar (the best leaders are the best teachers)

Over the years of studying leaders, leadership, and in particular those aspiring to be leaders what has been the most surprising is the inability and even unwillingness of so many to fairly and honestly evaluate the performance of others, as well as themselves. On the plus side, by separating ranking from rating in our Institutes, we have found people are better at ranking than rating. They can, by ranking, identify their best (and worst) performers and the reasons why, but their ratings frequently are either inconsistent, or grouped so closely together (generally at the high end), they become meaningless.

Why? We believe it comes from an underlying misunderstanding of the objectives of performance evaluation, coupled with overly complex systems found in many organizations. In the words of one of our best leaders¹⁴, “it too often resembles sitting down with your child the night before Christmas to tell him that he won’t be getting any presents.” The anticipation and expectations can be so heightened that people frequently over-evaluate themselves (often as a defensive tactic), sit in discussions that fail to convey the intended message (good, or bad), and become dissatisfied and disengaged despite receiving salary increases and incentive payments that represent significant expenditures for many organizations.

We have found that many managers not only complain about the people assigned to them, but also use their lack of performance as an excuse for their own failures. While others place the blame on those above them for their inability to engage those entrusted to them. Some, do both. Those who we would call leaders see the main purpose of performance evaluations differently, not to find fault and place blame, but as a useful tool in developing others. Better leaders go well beyond the formal evaluation process and develop others on an ongoing process. The best accept responsibility for every hour spent by everyone, on a daily basis.

Strengths – The better leaders identify their own strengths and find strengths in others. They also recognize in themselves and others what they are not good at doing, but unless the weakness is “career ending,” they tend to move past it by building organizations and teams based on individual strengths. They follow General Gray’s credo – “take what you get, make what you want.” The best leaders are the best developers of people– helping each individual reach their fullest potential (often beyond what both may have thought possible).

Many of the factors that engage employees are directly linked to developing them through emphasizing their strengths. It begins with providing them the materials and equipment they need to do their job to the best of their abilities. Making assignments based on what they do best (their strengths) both engages and develops people. Encourage them by talking to them about their careers, while monitoring and recognizing the progress they are making, are all critical to their development. Recent surveys have shown the majority of Americans prefer a career over a job.¹⁵

The *Gallup*¹⁶ data on engagement show the impact of building on strengths and the level of engagement. Based on a data base of millions of employees, Gallup reports that in the average organization, 30% of employees are engaged, 50% are not engaged, and 20% are actively disengaged. When the data is broken down further, we find that when the focus is on a person's strengths¹⁷ the numbers change to 61% engaged, 38% not engaged, and only 1% actively disengaged. Practicing developing others by emphasizing their strengths clearly produces tangible results.

Surprising to some, expecting more from people positively impacts employee engagement. Unfortunately (we have observed) many people incorrectly assume what motivates them is different than what motivates those that report to them. Participants in our Institutes frequently rank the work itself (the intangibles – interesting work, promotion and growth, and full appreciation for work done) higher for themselves and pay and benefits (the tangibles – job security, good wages and working conditions) higher for others. As a result, they may inappropriately lower their expectations of others.

“I haven't met many people that couldn't do 400% more than we allow them too.” - General Gray

L/Leader - One of the best ways to build on the strengths of others is to expect more from them. Looking back over my career, I think the most that was ever expected from me by others, given my age, experience, education, and compensation was when I was a Lance Corporal in the Marine Corps. I have often said that it took me 10 more years, two degrees (BS and MBA), a CPA certification, and promotion to a manager position in a “Big 8” public accounting firm to reach the level of responsibility I had as a Lance Corporal in the Marines. Those unfamiliar with the military and the Marine Corps in particular will require a further expectation.

A Lance Corporal (L/Cpl) in the Marines (they are the only branch of the US military that has the rank) is an enlisted rank (E-3). It is between Private First Class and Corporal. Although the L/Cpl is not a noncommissioned officer, he or she often assumes the responsibilities of a Corporal (for the pay of an E-3). Marines don't complain, but are proud to be called upon to assume more responsibility. In the infantry that can be the position of a Fire Team (4 Marines) leader. In supporting fields, it could mean being responsible for even more Marines.

While we have never seen the business equivalent position of an L/Leader, we have found that the better leaders expect more from their people and find ways to provide leadership experiences for them. The best leaders expect and get the most from their people and in return provide develop opportunities both early and often. Unlike many of our other findings about the better and best leaders, their developing people is more often told in stories about them, than in their own stories. General Gray is the best example. Mention his name to a current (even though he officially retired in 1991), or former Marine, and you will most likely hear a “General Gray story,” about how he impacted their development, either directly or indirectly. In the Marines developing others is part of their ethos and it is reflected in the concept of Teacher and Scholar.

Teacher and Scholar – Major General John A. LeJeune, the 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps said in 1921 “the relationship between officers and enlisted men should in no sense be that of a superior and inferior, nor that of a master and a servant, but rather that of a teacher and a scholar.”¹⁷ I am often reminded of this quote when observing the better leaders and think about how other terms; supervisor and subordinate, boss or superior, manager and workers, executives, professionals, and staff, even leader and follower all generate negative connotations. If we were to offer “Follower Institutes,” for example, how many would attend?

Thinking in terms of a teacher and scholar (for a leader and follower) demonstrates mutual respect. Both are desirable roles and the best leaders we have observed do both very well. As already noted they have broad spheres of interest and are voracious readers and acquirers of new knowledge. They are as inquisitive as you would expect any scholar to be. They have a great appreciation for history and study the history of the businesses and industries they lead. As scholars, they involve others in their learning. They are open to their input and advice. The best leaders remain scholars of leadership throughout their careers and (we have observed) well into their retirements.

The best leaders are also the best teachers and teaching, in my opinion, is the highest form of learning and the way we develop others. The best leaders look to the people they have developed as their proudest accomplishments. They also recognize and thank those they have developed for what they learn from them – a clear example of LeJeune’s teacher and scholar message. I will always remember one leader¹⁸ who after receiving all the accolades he was due at his retirement ceremony looked at those in attendance and said “if you look at me and don’t see you, then I have failed you.”

Leadership Practice - Summary

What makes some leaders better than others and what can we learn from the best?

Our leadership practice principles - if followed, we believe they can make you a better leader and if repeated (often enough) they will make you one of the best leaders. Leadership is not a spectator sport. You will not get better solely by reading about it, or listening to leaders share their philosophies.

Continually Stretching – the best leaders bring more to the leadership process. They continually stretch themselves by remaining open to new ideas and new sources of knowledge.

Consciously Thinking – the best leaders (we have studied) are acutely aware of their thinking, monitoring their process, and evaluating their results consciously.

Doing Openly – the best leaders not only do, but they do what they do openly. If people are aware of what you are doing, your intent and desired end state, along with your leadership philosophy, they can provide the advice you need before, during, and after (critiquing).

Developing others – the best way to practice leadership (or anything else) is by teaching it to others. How you teach them is as important as what. The best leaders build on strengths, set high expectations, create a mutual respect, and provide opportunities for leadership, early and often.

Continually Stretching – concepts and ideas

- ✓ Sphere of interest (expanding your leadership resources)
- ✓ Leadership lens (finding leadership in the usual and unusual)
- ✓ Suspending judgment (developing leadership opportunities)

Consciously Thinking – concepts and ideas

- ✓ Thinking on the “run” (evaluating, making adjustments along the way)
- ✓ Critiques (learning from successes as well as failures)
- ✓ Simplicity (capturing the essence; making it easy to understand)

Doing Openly concepts and ideas

- ✓ Leadership philosophies (openly sharing your ideals and ideas)
- ✓ Leading by examples (storytelling by you and about you)
- ✓ To-Dos (a leadership practice “scorecard”)

Developing Others – concepts and ideas

- ✓ Strengths (identifying , building on, and engaging)
- ✓ L/Leader (raising expectations and providing early opportunities)
- ✓ Teacher and Scholar (the best leaders are the best teachers)

These principles and concepts have been incorporated into a **Leadership Practice Worksheet**

✓ Thinking on the 'Run' (Breaking it into chunks)

✓ Critiques (What are you thinking and feeling?)

✓ Simplicity (Capturing the Essence)

Leadership Practice Worksheets

They are different – *WHY?*

What's the difference between Leadership Practice *Worksheets* and traditional note taking? The most obvious differences begin with the format. Instead of a vertical listing, we use a horizontal format. The main reason for this is to change your traditional way of thinking from vertical (sequential) to lateral (suspend ordering). Next, is the absence of lines. This difference is to encourage you to write across the form, making connections, linking ideas, and even using symbols (or drawings) instead of words.

These and other differences can be explained by comparing traditional note taking with our leadership practice principles and concepts.

Traditional Note Taking

- Records what you are hearing (passive)
- Flows sequentially (creating outlines)
- Limits thinking (to your business/sector)
- Thoughts are distractions (and ignored)
- Ideas are listed independently
- Critique later, if at all
- Attempts to capture everything
- Notes are put into files
- What was said is often forgotten
- Practices listening

Leadership Practice

- Records what you are thinking and feeling (active)
- Ordering is less important (breaking into “chunks”)
- Encourages thinking across all sectors (expanded leadership lens)
- Thoughts are critical and recorded (along with feelings)
- Ideas are gathered and linked
- Critique “on the run”
- Captures the essence (simplicity)
- Ideas are put into actions (applied)
- Your thoughts can become part of your leadership philosophy
- Practices leadership

The best way to fully understand the differences between traditional note taking and leadership practice is to use the *Worksheet*. It may be difficult at first (especially if you are a committed left-brain, vertically focused thinker), but the more you practice it, the easier it will become. And the more you practice leadership, the better leader you will become.

To learn more about our Leadership Practice principles and concepts read **Our Best Leaders = Your Best Leadership**, *What makes some leaders better than others and what can we learn from the best?* Available at leadership.franklin.edu (and summarized on the following page).

¹ Outliers, by Malcolm Gladwell. The quote is from page 39.

² *Why Talent is overrated*, Geoff Colvin, *Fortune*, October 21, 2008

³ See for example, *Building a New structure for School Leadership* and *Bridging the Gap between Standards and Achievement*, both by Richard F. Elmore, and published by Albert Shanker Institute

⁴ Daniel Coyle's *The Talent Code*, Greatness isn't born, it grows. Here's how.

⁵ What's myelin you might ask? It's the insulation that wraps around the neurons in our brains, which optimizes the brain circuit and the more we "fire" that circuit it becomes stronger, faster, our thoughts become more fluent, and we become more talented. Can myelin and deep practice make one a better leader? We think so. Coyle tells us that myelin is universal (it applies to talent across the spectrum). He also says myelin "wraps, it doesn't unwrap" (which is why habits are hard to break). And for myelin, "age matters." It "waves" until the 30's, shows a net gain until around 50, but we retain our ability to myelinate throughout our lives. So, it's never too late to become a better leader.

⁶ Gray and Otte, *The Conflicted Leader and Vantage Leadership*, Franklin University Press, 2006

⁷ Our Leadership Center has served (since 2003) as a resource and a catalyst for leadership in central Ohio and beyond. Thanks to the support provided by our benefactors we have been able to study leaders and leadership at a depth greater than would ever have been possible without the Center. Over the years, close to 100 leaders from business, community, government, and educational institutions have shared with us their views on leadership through our Mason Leadership Symposiums and Hall Leadership Lessons. To see the depth of these presentations visit our web site leadership.franklin.edu

⁸ Academics have, for years, debated quantitative research (traditional research based on testing a stated hypothesis) and qualitative research (forming your hypothesis based on your research), which has been considered a lesser form of research. We now add the idea of intuitive research (a derivative of qualitative research based on observations, analysis, and review of existing resources) with a special emphasis on those considered the best leaders (see Note below for a listing and special thanks to those leaders). We believe our intuitive research is consistent with our principles for leadership practice.

⁹ *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*

¹⁰ *On Intelligence*, by Jeff Hawkins

¹¹ *Tactics, USMC (FMFM 1-3)*

¹² From the foreword of *Power Ambition Glory*, by Steve Forbes and John Prevas

¹³ Tracy Austin, Director of Student Coaching Services, Franklin University

¹⁴ Jim Kunk, President, Central Ohio Region, Huntington Bank

¹⁵ *What Americans Really Want . . . Really*, Frank Lutz. Americans prefer (67% a career over a job 20%).

¹⁶ *Building Engaged Schools*, by Gary Gordon

¹⁷ This has been quoted in many, many, articles and books. This quote came from *The Marine Corps Gazette*, November 2008.

¹⁸ Major General Richard Alexander, Adjutant General, Ohio Army National Guard (Retired)

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