

The “Practice” of Leadership

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Introduction

A “Practice” is a discipline of daily life aimed at improving one’s skills or character. It is most evident in sports – the committed footballer or cricketer or chess player or athlete for example. These are people for whom their work is their life and their life their work. And this leads on to those of us who have other occupations – whatever they are. Why don’t we treat our livelihood with the same dedication and zeal - especially those of us who have the privilege to be leaders? Surely any leader would want to improve their skills, develop excellence and commit to daily improvement but how many leaders do we see who are committed to this in the same way as an enthusiastic sportsperson?

Working in small Leadership Development Groups (6-8 people) with a facilitator, leaders can examine their strengths and aims and develop themselves as leaders with the same commitment as others who have a “practice”

Some suggestions for questions for the sessions follow. Many of these come from *Creating the Good Life* by James O’Toole. He looks at the work of Aristotle and the assumptions that a good life is about achieving our potential and developing character – our rewards being internal; peace of mind, strength and self-respect rather than material riches. Aristotle was especially concerned with the role of friendship and community – aspects that are essential for a “practice” and also had much to say about leaders (albeit in the context of state leaders)

The Leadership Development Groups are a place where people can be open and give and receive feedback on their specific issues – both individual and business issues. It is a place for support and challenge.

Session 1. Living a Fulfilled Life

A fulfilled life can be defined in terms of continuously developing in order to reach our full potential (whatever that may be) Anything which helps us move towards attaining that potential is “good”; anything that blocks it is “bad”. Obviously as each of us is unique our potential and what we need to do to attain it will be highly personal. This also isn’t a matter of position or status. Anyone, whatever their job, can open themselves up to this process.

The latest thinking in positive psychology reinforces much of this. Happiness comes from learning and growing and focusing on others rather than on our own wishes. Aristotle saw leisure activities as a means of refreshing oneself but he also saw certain types of work as having the same effect. It therefore isn’t a question of work-life balance but what we do at work and what we do in our leisure time that counts.

- Is it important for me to be fulfilled?
- What does being fulfilled mean for me?
- What are my aims at work and in life?
- How would I classify my aims in terms of service to others versus my own welfare?

Session 2. "Practice"

A practice is a way of developing and growing in a chosen area. If we want to be the best cricketer we can be we would study past games, experts and masters of the art of cricket, think about it and reflect on our own style. More importantly we have to play cricket and get feedback and coaching from others and be open to changing our behaviours as we develop. We have to accept that there are rules and standards of excellence in cricket and be part of the community of those who are involved with cricket. We can't just dismiss feedback or change the rules if we don't like it. (Well we can but it won't be cricket)

Similarly with leadership. There are guidelines and standards – not as clearly defined in sports but they are there. There are authorities in the form of "good" leaders – we study these to learn from them but as in a sport we know that imitation won't work – we have to learn and adapt points to our own unique leadership styles. We need to practise leadership and be continuously open to feedback on what works and what doesn't. And we need to talk about leadership with others – whether more formally as in leadership seminars or over a coffee break.

- Do I have or need a "practice" to develop myself as a leader – and if not – why not?
- Who are my leadership heroes (and villains)?
- Who do I have as part of my "community" to support and challenge me?

Session 3. Developing the Virtues

A "virtue" is simply a character trait that helps us contribute positively to life and to others. As Aristotle pointed out it is the mean between two extremes. Fanatical health regimes aren't virtues but vices. Courage is the mean between cowardice and recklessness. To develop our virtues we need discipline and self-control. As Aristotle points out excellence is a habit! And out of this we will be developing our character and building self-respect.

- What are my virtues? And are my strengths virtues I can develop?
- How do I develop my virtues?
- What do I need to start or stop doing?
- What stops me expressing my virtues? How can I overcome this?

Session 4. Leadership

There are many thousands of writings on leadership. From the perspective of the fulfilled life however the leader needs to focus on developing themselves and equally others. They need above all practical wisdom – the ability to make things happen! But this involves accepting the unpredictability of work and life and resisting the temptation to try and control everything. (Impossible anyway and only the fanatic is certain about everything)

The leader in this definition has the responsibility to help others lead their own "good" lives. They do this best by upholding their own standards and transmitting these to others by teaching, coaching and developing them. The good leader helps others get the most out of their work life – and an essential part of this is fun and enjoyment!

- Is it important for me that my staff lead a fulfilled life?
- What are the rewards I have to distribute– both financial and otherwise?
- How can I resolve the dilemmas between family, friends, work and myself?
- What can I learn about leadership outside the workplace?

Session 5. The “Practice” of Leadership

All this is fine but it is in daily life that “practice” happens and in the context of an organisation and the daily demands on us. So we need to look at the real issues that help or hinder us.

- What are the situations at work (and outside it) that I find challenging?
- What are the situations at work (and outside it) that bring out the best in me?
- What do I need to learn from these?
- How can I work with others on developing my leadership practice?
- Where does my power and influence fit in?
- What do I need to do daily?

Session 6. Deepening Practice

"How can I enhance the level of truth, the experience of beauty, the assurance of goodness, and the sense of unity felt by people who work around and with me?"

It is very much up to each of us to determine our path with the help and guidance of others of course. There are numerous and helpful pearls of wisdom out there – some will be appropriate, some not – it's your choice. These include:

- Learning to calm yourself and focus on inner peace before acting
 - Reducing stress
 - Being aware of your needs
 - Using reflection as a tool to grow
 - Letting go of past limiting beliefs
 - Enhancing awareness
 - Developing your strengths and applying them
 - Developing flexibility of thought and action
 - Being true to what's important for you – being authentic
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- What is the most important arena for your growth – what do you need to face up to?
 - What are the questions do you need to ask yourself?
 - What questions do you want to share with us
 - What makes leadership worthwhile and meaningful to you?

References

Robert K. Greenleaf Servant Leadership, 1977, Paulist Press
Alistair Macintyre, After Virtue
James O'Toole, Creating the Good Life

Identifying Strengths

One of the routes that we can take to identify our strengths is through using the available strengths questionnaires. These include:

The VIA Inventory of Strengths -www.viastrengths.org - which measures 24 character strengths and gives you a free feedback report on your top five character strengths.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder -www.strengthsfinder.com - which measures 34 themes of talent and gives you a feedback report on your top five themes of talent. However, to access the Clifton StrengthsFinder, which is owned by The Gallup Organization in the United States, you need to purchase a book that includes a StrengthsFinder access code (either of the two Clifton books in the bibliography below have this, or you can find further details at www.strengthsfinder.com).

The PersonalityStrengths Project - www.personalitystrengths.com - provides free questionnaires and reports that cover more than 50 different strengths, as well as measures of personality, happiness, and well-being. You will all be familiar with this one!



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