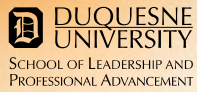


The Practice of Leadership

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For the Mind, Heart and Spirit

What Is a Practice?

prac-tice (*prăk' tīs*) - n.

1. Repeated performance of an activity in order to learn or perfect a skill
 - *Practice will make you a good musician.*
2. The exercise of an occupation or profession
 - *He practices psychiatry at his new clinic.*
3. The business of a professional person
 - *When she retired from law, I took over her practice.*

Adapted from: *Webster's Unabridged*. (1996). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Publishing.

Occasionally we hear an expression like: doctors "practice" medicine, or an attorney "practices" law. We know that athletes must practice to excel in sport, and – as the old joke goes -- the only way for musicians to get to Carnegie Hall is "practice, practice, practice."

Yet there's a special sense in which we talk about professionals, such as therapists or even architects, devoting their entire career to a particular discipline - and committing themselves to excellence in that discipline. It's this sense of the word 'practice' that we want to consider here, and ask the question "what might it mean for a person to 'practice' leadership?"

Can We “Practice” Leadership?

- Similarities to other professional “practices”:
 - *perfection is unattainable*
 - *commitment to excellence*
 - *learn from experience*
 - *failure and success build knowledge*
 - *requires lifelong learning*

When we use "practice" in this particular way, it signifies that the domain of a person's activity is not a science but an imperfect art. Both medicine and law, for example, are built upon an evolving knowledge base, so "perfection" as a physician or lawyer is never attainable - there's always more to learn.

What we expect of such professionals, then, is commitment to excellence, and to continuously learn from their experience. Because the profession is at best an imperfect science, mistakes will be inevitable. Still, one can succeed and – over time – learn to make fewer mistakes.

In this presentation, I suggest to you that it makes sense for leaders to "practice" leadership - to commit to excellence, and to reflect on - and learn from - their experience leading themselves and others.

Aristotle and “Practical Wisdom”

- Practical wisdom is characterized by:
 - *a concern for the application of universal principles to particular situations*
 - *deliberation about selecting appropriate means to achieve desirable ends*
 - *using imagination and discernment*
 - *incorporating the virtues of character in seeking what is good*

Let's explore the ancient roots of this modern phenomenon, by examining something Aristotle called "practical wisdom." In his writings on ethics, Aristotle distinguished between "theoretical wisdom" and "practical wisdom." Theoretical wisdom is the pursuit of philosophers, he wrote – and results in a search for timeless, universal truths.

Those who have *practical* wisdom, however, must understand and apply timeless, universal truths and principles to particular circumstances. Theoretical wisdom, like scientific knowledge, is contemplative, whereas practical wisdom is concerned with action. But before one acts, one has to consider the ends one is trying to achieve, and what choices – or possible actions – are most likely to bring about the desired results. Both creativity – in imagining possible outcomes, and judgment – to discern the best course of action, are integral to Aristotle's practical wisdom.

“A will to action marks the leader - a willingness to enter the field of human inter-action where one learns that pain gives rise to compassion; that correction is the author of wisdom; that daring sharpens decision; that courage ennobles the spirit; and that in seeds of doubt reside flowers of faith.”

(Korac-Kakabadse et al., 2001, p. 209)

Practical wisdom, then, is a kind of “craft knowledge” – a type of expertise that requires practice and life experience. Also significant is Aristotle’s linking practical wisdom to other virtues and to the goal of a life well-lived. We’ll return to this connection between action and ethical principles shortly.

This quote, written by modern-day leadership scholars, echoes sentiments that are fundamentally Aristotelian: The study of leadership is not an intellectual exercise, although it requires intelligence. The leader – or, in Aristotle’s term, the person who is practically wise – throws himself into the human predicament to solve important problems. She does so with courage and feeling. He reflects on and learns from experience – both failure and success. She decides on a course of action that others may doubt but that ultimately inspires trust. Above all, the practically wise leader elevates others to a higher moral plane.

MacIntyre's Concept of "Practice"

- Characteristics of Practices:
 - *a universal feature of human cultures*
 - *an arena in which people can strive for and achieve excellence*
 - *cooperative activity that benefits both the people performing the activity and the community which supports it*
 - *contain within them standards that define excellence*

In 1981, Alasdair MacIntyre, a philosopher from Notre Dame, published a widely influential book called "After Virtue." In it, he laments the degeneration of virtue into a postmodern, subjective, "feel good" phenomenon. Today, he says, one can no longer refer to moral criteria as agreed-upon standards. Instead, MacIntyre suggests that virtue is not something that an individual defines for himself, but that virtue arises from – and is held in esteem by – a community. Ballerinas and quarterbacks achieve excellence not by perfecting their own idiosyncratic style – as refined or elegant it may be, but by performing to standards set by others (such as judges and officials), which include following rules and winning the approval of others: namely, fans, coaches and fellow athletes.

“To enter into a practice is to accept the authority of those standards and the inadequacy of my own performance as judged by them. It is to subject my own attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes to the standards which currently and partially define the practice.”

(MacIntyre, 1981, p. 177)

This notion of practice articulated by MacIntyre is consistent both with Aristotle's practical wisdom and modern-day usage of the term. Think back to the arenas of medicine and law mentioned earlier. Clearly there are good doctors and bad doctors, good lawyers and bad lawyers. These two professions have standards, so, for example, it is possible for a doctor or lawyer to lose their license to practice medicine or law. Those respective standards are “owned” by a community of professionals. When the standards are upheld, their respective clienteles and the broader society benefit. When the standards or professional ethics are breached, the public is harmed.

More from Alisdair MacIntyre on “Practice”

- Example of Practices:
 - *farming, playing chess, architecture*
 - *the enquiries of physics, chemistry and biology, and the work of the historian*
 - *the making and sustaining of family life*
 - *painting and music*

- The following are not practices:
 - *playing tic-tac-toe, planting turnips, bricklaying*

MacIntyre gives the example of a fishing crew whose sole purpose is to generate a profit. To be sure, its members acquire and practice various skills. Contrast that with a fishing crew whose members are devoted both to excellence in fishing and to the welfare of the other crew members and their families. Their excellence is both in their character and in their skill. Their lives depend on one another, and not just for the economic returns on their investment and their efforts. The business of commercial fishing is a kind of practice far-removed in MacIntyre’s mind from a crew that buries its dead at sea, celebrates its successes, and is interdependent on an entire fishing village.

Misapplying the Concept of Practice

- Practice can become perverted
 - *the contribution a practice makes to society can be distorted when the pursuit of money, power and status dominate the practice*
 - *practice can be turned toward evil (e.g., the practice of state-sponsored torture)*

So a key idea for MacIntyre is that a practice has “goods,” or desirable outcomes, that are both internal to the practice, but also have a wider benefit.

Personally, I find the notion of practice to be widely applicable to the exercise of leadership. We can indeed strive for excellence in leading others through change. There are standards for what constitutes effective leadership that reside not in the individual, but in the community. When leaders commit themselves to leading well, it not only builds their character, but it produces residual benefits for the community of followers they serve.

MacIntyre also acknowledges that humans can devote themselves to evil practices, and that an inordinate pursuit of wealth, status or power over others weakens the practice as a whole. Today, we need not look far to see how such distortions in the practice of leadership have hurt corporate shareholders as well as the public at large, and have given leadership a bad name.

Peter Drucker's "Practice of Management"

■ Key Ideas from Drucker's 1954 Classic:

- *management is a distinct and important function that determines the viability and success of the firm.*
- *the managerial task, though amenable to scientific analysis, is practice-oriented.*
- *managers (leaders) can enhance and sharpen their skills through education.*
- *integrity is the hallmark of managerial character; along with integrity comes a sense of accountability.*

(Zahra, 2003)

My thesis, then, is that in the history of ideas, there is an established foundation we can build on to anchor our notion of leadership as practice. Let me share with you the thoughts of a few other contemporary writers.

Peter Drucker, often called the father of modern management, wrote his classic "The Practice of Management" in 1954. If you read Drucker carefully, his notion of management contains some elements of what today we call leadership, and it's safe to say that what Drucker meant when he wrote about management encompasses current concepts of both management and leadership.

More than any other contemporary figure, Drucker established the notion that managing and leading an organization is a discipline, and that it can never be an exact science. Just as the practice of medicine could never be reduced to specific techniques such as urinalysis, managing and leading an organization is more than budgeting, marketing, strategic planning and the like.

Drucker on Management as a Liberal Art

- For Drucker, managing and leading are about personal and collective performance.
- Managers can improve their performance through:

“systematic study of principles, the acquisition of organized knowledge, and the systematic analysis of [their] own performance ...”

(Drucker, 1954, p. 9)

For over 50 years, Drucker tirelessly articulated the principles and knowledge that would be most useful – and I mean that very much in the way Aristotle wrote of practical wisdom – to the effective running of an enterprise and the benefit of its customers, employees, and society at large. As for the “systematic analysis of [one’s] performance,” another person named Donald Schön would study what he called “reflection on practice.” Before that, let’s consider how a person first experiences this “systematic analysis of performance.”

“Owning” One’s Leadership Practice

- A Process Characterized by:
 - *becoming aware one is practicing leadership*
 - *attending to the effects one has on others*
 - *seeking and receiving feedback from others*
 - *critically reflecting on one’s leadership actions and their consequences*
 - *accepting the challenge of getting better at leading*

In the history of work, there's a common phenomenon that I and many others have witnessed over and over.

It goes something like this: A person who excels at her job gets tapped on the shoulder and asked to become a supervisor - that is, to take on the responsibility for the work of other people. Sometimes she'll continue to do the work she was originally doing, and it is done alongside the people being supervised - in effect, she has become a "working manager."

Usually it takes some time before she realizes that the nature of the job has changed. She is no longer being paid to do the work herself, but to achieve real work results through others.

It's at this point that - often through an "aha" moment - that she sees, for the first time, that her job - her profession, now - is to lead and manage others.

That is – she has a leadership practice. To the extent that she commits herself to mastering this new role, a discipline that will require action and reflection, we say she is taking “ownership” of her leadership practice.

Donald Schön's "Reflective Practitioner" (1983)

- Studied how professionals learn to improve their practice
 - reacted against “technical-rationality” – a purely scientific view of practice
 - instead, knowledge inherent in professional practice is better understood as “artful-doing”
- Professionals draw on what they have learned before, but “think things through” – because every new situation is unique
- Reflective practitioners
 - develop questions and ideas about their activities and practice
 - are mindful of the “frames” through which they view each situation, and choose and adapt them carefully

When this happens, people newly placed in a leadership role begin to focus on learning how to manage and lead better. The process of how this happens was studied by MIT researcher Donald Schön, resulting in his 1983 book *The Reflective Practitioner*. Influenced by the American educator John Dewey, Schön observed that practitioners reflect-IN-practice -- something akin to thinking on one's feet. They attend to their feelings and are cognizant of any implicit theories of action that they may be using in the moment.

According to Schön: The reflective practitioner “allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon... and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior.”

Schön's reflective practitioner also systematically reflects-ON-practice. She identifies what may have been unique about a particular situation. She may even formulate a theory or "working hypothesis" that she can test in other, similar situations in which she may find herself in the future.

Wenger's "Communities of Practice"

- Informal learning situated in a social context
 - *a key feature of "organizational learning"*
- Joint enterprises
 - *self-organizing, may or may not be supported by the organization*
 - *defined by their doing, not by their place in the organization's structure*
- Mutual engagement
 - *members become bound together as a social entity*
- Shared repertoire
 - *they develop their own special vocabulary, routines, artifacts, and working styles*

Reflective practitioners also talk with each other and "compare notes" on what they are doing and on the frameworks that inform their practice.

In the 1990s, researcher Etienne Wenger studied what are called "communities of practice": practitioners who come together to share their knowledge and expertise and to learn from one another. They do this in order to improve their practice -- because collectively they are committed to excellence.

Wenger found that these communities of practice - and he studied communities that ranged from midwives to butchers to tailors - grow organically, and are formed primarily by social relationships that are *situated* in a common context. The very same kind of patterns of learning and behavior he observed in these trades and professions, have also been observed in engineering firms, companies with call centers, and among software developers.

One can't help but wonder what it might look like if people who saw themselves as leaders, and who considered leadership to be their practice, formed a learning community dedicated to supporting one another in striving for excellence in leading.

The Practice of Leadership: Possibilities

- Identify standards of excellence
- Strive for improvement
- Forge the link to moral values – keep it front and center
- Reflect on what you do and what you experience as a result
- Engage with a community of like-minded practitioners

I believe the notion of "leadership practice" holds much value for all who seek to become more effective in leading others in positive, meaningful change. If you find yourself exercising leadership in a particular social or organizational context (and it could be at work, in your community, your family or civic organization), think about how you could improve.

What do you think would distinguish truly excellent leadership from merely adequate leadership? This is not an easily answered question. The answer, in fact, may take some time for you to formulate – and expect that, as you practice leadership, you'll realize that experience will change your answer. What you believe now may not be what you believe ten years from now.

So, find others who also desire to improve their leadership practice. Seek to learn from them. Test the theories you are learning about in your courses here at Duquesne, refine them, and make them your own.

Above all, take responsibility for growing your leadership practice. You've already done that by enrolling in a graduate program in leadership, and I commend you for that. In this course, I hope that you'll explore with your classmates other ways that - working together - you can "turbo-charge" your learning about leadership, and the result will be a deepened commitment to lifelong learning about leadership.

For Reflection

1. When and how did you first become aware that you have opportunity to lead others? What impact did this realization have on you? How do you feel about it now?
2. In what “arenas of action” (family, civic organization, work team, etc.) is your leadership practice situated? What do these arenas have in common, and how does leading in one affect how you lead in another?

For Reflection (*continued*)

3. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest, how would you rate your commitment to developing your own practice as a leader? What do you think a 10 would look like? What kinds of situations, events, or people do you imagine might serve as catalysts to increase your commitment to expand your practice of leadership?
4. As you grow your leadership practice, how do you envision the concepts of *virtue* and *character* might become more meaningful to you?

For Discussion

1. What standards of excellence do you use to assess the leadership effectiveness of others in a life or work context important to you? How do you want others to judge *your* leadership practice?
2. Should leaders (and/or managers) be licensed? What are advantages and disadvantages of such professional credentialing?
3. After reading the article cited on the next slide (by Wenger), discuss: what might you do within a context of your choice (e.g., work, community, family or civic organization) to foster a *community of leaders* who are focused on helping each other grow their leadership practice?

For Further Learning

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