



Build Yourself: Leadership as a Practice

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Several years ago, I accepted an invitation from a friend to a yoga class. The thought of going for the first time was intimidating. I didn't know any of the language, poses or even where to go inside. Thankfully, the experience wasn't as terrifying as I contemplated.

Since then, I've participated in yoga classes more often—each time my form, understanding and endurance gets better. Recently at the conclusion of class, the instructor said to me, “Thank you for sharing your practice with me today.” While an everyday concept for the teacher, it struck me as curious. I didn't show up to practice anything—I wanted to “do” yoga. I wondered, how did my fumbling through a class share anything—and what was my practice?

Defining a “Practice”

Since then, I've explored the idea of practice and how it applies to our lives as leaders. Professionally, I've used the term “practice” to describe my vocation many times. I worked as an attorney before Bell Leadership and often referred to my job as a law practice. Other professionals such as medical doctors, dental doctors, and architects use a similar phrase to describe their occupation. Defining the work as a practice implies a continual development of skill over time—that professional accomplishment never concludes.

As a verb, “practice” refers to repeated action to develop proficiency in a task. We practice many things—sports, hobbies, musical instruments, drama, and educational pursuits. Most of us have practiced something in our lives with varied levels of interest and success. To practice something requires engagement

and repetition through active participation. It's often difficult and time consuming.

The Practice of Leadership

Over years of analyzing leadership, I've come to understand that the work of a leader is “a practice.” Thinking of leadership in these terms has helped me appreciate the lifelong pursuit required to work and behave as an effective leader.

To be clear, building any skill takes practice. Achievers™ graduates know that no one can simply hope for leadership prowess to appear—our development requires daily repetition to establish new behavior patterns.

And development of a single skillset in leadership isn't an end point.

To think of leadership like “a practice” recognizes a lifelong endeavor that requires the continual evolution of skill.

It also acknowledges inevitable side steps, regression and missteps. When we evaluate the practice of leadership, we understand that no perfect leader exists—no one single “best” leader among others.

After many decades of research, the Achiever model sets out common patterns of effective leadership. While we talk about our “best leaders,” we also recognize that leaders are imperfect. And thus, to consider “the practice” of leadership allows each person the opportunity to grow their skills and influence, while making a few mistakes along the way. It's the willingness to grow and the curiosity to

seek the practice of leadership that makes it worth the considerable effort.

The challenge then, is how to practice ... a practice. How do we build a set of skills in the pursuit of continual growth, but also celebrate the milestones along the way?

Practicing a Practice

One leader recently explained to me their practice of becoming more humble. For years, the leader was driven towards success, racking up accomplishments and accolades. In that pursuit of excellence, they matured into an experienced leader who now ran a successful organization. And yet, they began having challenges keeping highly motivated team members.

After some searching, the leader realized that they often took the spotlight. While clients and some coworkers were drawn to their magnetism, others felt unseen and became uncommitted to the greater goal. After realizing the dynamic, the leader began the practice of allowing others to shine and lead. Every day, they made a note to speak last and ask questions later. In transparency, the leader noted that it does not always work—that their need to engage takes over. But recognizing the dynamic and continually striving for refinement keeps them moving in a positive direction. Recently, I spoke with a new member of the leader's team who commented how effectively the leader seemed to center others around success. The practice of a practice, over the past 10+ years, was working.

Building Our Own Leadership Practice

For all of us, describing our work as leaders like "a practice," helps frame the pursuit of constant learning and evolution. And to continue to grow our practice, it's important to implement small and repeatable steps that help us shift our focus in how we lead. No one formula will fit every leader, and each leader has areas to grow that are unique to their circumstance and style.

My recommendation is to pick one thing that can be done better. The leader I mentioned wanted to be more humble, and through reflection and self-awareness was able to pinpoint small action steps to directly effect change for themselves over time. Individual practice will look different, but the basic principles will apply.

With consistent effort, these steps can develop into lasting habits. But remember that practice is ongoing; it's very normal to fall back on the old habits that were worn well into the framework of our personalities. Don't give up or lose commitment. Persistence is how we make new practices second nature.

From my perspective, I am always thrilled to learn more about someone's practice of leadership, and to have the opportunity to help in small ways to build that practice. So, when we get the opportunity to work with leaders in our programs, the words of the yoga instructor often come to mind, and I silently thank each person I work with for sharing their practice of leadership with me and the Bell team. 🌱

PRACTICAL ACTIONS: Building a New Leadership Skill

Consider someone who wants to become a better listener. Their practice might look something like this:

Learn – Identify what effective listening entails and choose a specific behavior or two to focus on, such as maintaining eye contact, withholding judgment, or using Achiever listening techniques.

Act – Put the behavior(s) into practice. This might involve letting others speak first, minimizing interruptions, and demonstrating genuine interest in what others are saying.

Gather Feedback – Consistently self-assess your behavior and progress. Solicit input from peers to identify blind spots.

Refine – Use the feedback to adjust and improve your approach. This could mean adopting a new listening technique or tweaking existing ones.

Repeat – Continue the cycle until intentional listening becomes a default behavior.

