



“You are always practicing something, the question is,- What are you practicing”

-Martial Arts Sensei

By [David Weart](#)

The Importance of Deliberate Practice

The above quote, found in Susan Scott's [Fierce Leadership](#), challenges leaders to reflect on how their actions and behaviors contribute to their leadership narrative. Everything a leader does from the constructive actions of vision setting, decision-making, and resolving conflicts to destructive acts such as lacking empathy and micromanaging, serve as indicators to the quality of their leadership practice. Towards the end of his career, management guru, Peter Drucker said that effective management “demands doing certain-and fairly simple-things. It consists of a small number of practices” [2]. Applying creative liberty by swapping out *management*, for *leadership*, Drucker's adage still applies. If *practicing* leadership is vital to becoming an effective leader, the questions to answer then become what type of practices and how do I practice?

Research into the science of expert level performance provide military leaders of all experience levels and positions insight into how top athletes, chess prodigies, musicians, and surgeons develop world-class skill in their professions. Simply put, expert achievers practice their skill differently- they establish a *deliberate practice*. While the research behind *deliberate practice* by [Anders Ericsson's](#) study of expertise and coined as the "10,000" rule featured in Malcolm Gladwell's [Outliers](#), focused primarily on vocations outside of the military, the principles are applicable to our profession.

Ericsson defines *deliberate practice* as the activities specifically intended to improve performance[3]. Ericsson' asserts that deliberate practice activities are activities separate from our work (public performance/competition where compensation is the reward) and play activities (leisure activities, done without a specific goal)[4]. Effective military leaders develop a lifelong commitment (Ericsson posits that expert performance requires 10 years to development) to *deliberate practice* in order to hone their capacity as a leader. They apply energy and time outside normal work as practice to develop themselves intellectually, emotionally, and physically to propel their performance to new heights. The *deliberately practicing leader* seeks out opportunities for professional development outside of what their organization's programs or institutional educational requirements. They embrace the challenge inherent in conducting *deliberate practice* by going outside of their comfort zones and setting stretch goals to attain new skills and competencies.

Where to Begin

Deliberate practice in the military leader's context consists of three major components: assessing, training, and learning/reflecting through feedback.

The foundational component of *deliberate assessment* requires a deep appraisal of your attributes and competencies as a leader and setting a focused stretch goal intended to improve on a specific aspect of your capacity as a leader. A review of recent evaluation reports, Multi Source Assessment Feedback (MSAF), and unsolicited feedback, provide the leader with an understanding of their current capabilities. As gaps and areas of potential growth are identified, the leader sets her stretch goal and development plan focused on improving their current weaknesses. Contrary to the strengths-based leadership movement, developing expertise involves deliberate and prolonged practice directed at overcoming skill weakness and not building on one's strengths[4]. By actively focusing on one aspect of your leadership practice in a time bound window, the leader experiments with different actions and behaviors that yield effective results.

As the stretch goal is selected, the *deliberately practicing leader* develops a training plan consisting of studying and enacting the desired skills and competencies. Studying includes both self examination and subject matter studying. Deep self study promotes reflecting on personal values, worldview, and identity as a leader. Self aware leaders are more effective leaders. Subject matter studying requires intentionally consuming material pertinent to your stretch goal. As new conceptual skills and competences are acquired the leader must practice them in different contexts. Enacting these new behaviors provides a medium for transferring and applying the new knowledge, skills, and attitudes[5]. Counseling/coaching sessions with subordinates are prime opportunities for the leader to put his training into practice.

The final component of learning and reflection begins with seeking feedback on the leader's performance. This requires candor and a sense of psychological safety between the sender and receiver of the feedback. Interpreting feedback entails *deliberate* reflection of both positive and negative outcomes. *Deliberately practicing* leaders, learn from their experiences quickly and develop new levels of thinking in order to achieve their stretch goal. They take action on these new insights and adjust their deliberate practice until they reach mastery of that skill or competency.

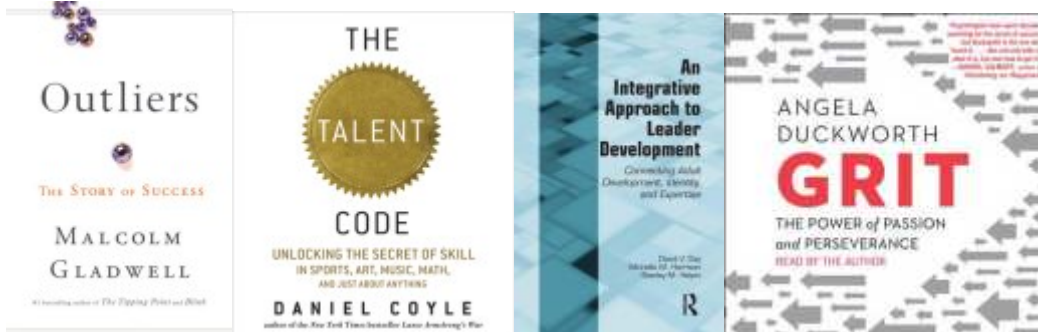
Ericsson's research suggests that expert level performance requires a 10 year period of daily deliberate practice activities[6]. If you desire to become the best leader you can for yourself, your family, or your organization, why not start deliberately practicing now?

Questions for the Reader:

- 1) How are you practicing leadership in your organization?
- 2) What stretch goals do you have to become a better leader?
- 3) How can you help other establish and pursue stretch goals?

Want to Learn More about Deliberate Practice? Check out these resources.

Books:



Podcasts:



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End Notes:

1. Scott, Susan *Fierce Leadership*, Broadway Business, New York, 2009
2. Drucker, Peter *The Effective Executive: The Definitive Guide to Getting the Right Things Done*, Harper Collins, New York 2006.
3. Ericsson, Krampe, Tesch-Romer, "The Role of Deliberate Practice in Acquisition of Expert Performance" *Psychology Review*, Vol 100, 1993
4. Day, Harrison, Halpin, *An Integrative Approach to Leader Development*, Psychology Press, New York, 2009.

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