

Practice: A Personal Success Trait

By Tom Northup January, 2007

We all know we want personal successes from our jobs, such as reaching a certain sales level or getting that major promotion. We work toward these successes by regularly practicing skills, behaviors and traits that lead to higher effectiveness.

When we concentrate on fulfillment of our goals, we give ourselves a reason to do more and do it better every day. Because we concentrate, we regularly reach higher plateaus and develop a can do attitude. Success breeds more success, leading to our becoming the successful person we envision.

Effective CEOs build a culture where employees can become personal successes because they understand that successful people build successful organizations.

Why Practice

The successful people I work with always search for and acquire knowledge that will make them more effective. Knowledge is the key. Without it nobody can go to the next level.

However, we must use the knowledge we gain for it to become valuable. A favorite saying of mine is, "No great manager/leader ever fell from heaven. It is a learned skill, not inherited." To enhance our success we must practice regularly to internalize the knowledge we've gained.

Personal development doesn't come without sustained effort and commitment. It takes about six weeks of regular practice to master even simple new skills.

Annika Sorenstam and Tiger Woods are top golf professionals. They may hit a thousand practice shots for every tournament shot they take. They practice regularly and perform periodically. We in the business world are just the opposite. We perform every day but rarely practice.

We hear about a new technique and try to use it immediately, failing to realize that it may take thousands of hours of practice, practice, practice and substantial effort to become comfortable with it. Before we implement a technique in key areas of our business, we must devote time to becoming experts in its use.

When we don't practice we fall prey to the insanity adage: doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. We recycle our problems!

Attitudes Affect Growth

Our attitudes about personal growth greatly impact our lives. Successful people understand that we actually work for ourselves, which means that jobs are not drudgery but personally rewarding ways to improve our capabilities, skills and behaviors.

When we experience the pure joy of work, we discover that success comes not at the end of the battle, but as the culmination of a game. Every day we work towards achieving our long range goals. To those who know the pure joy of work, the satisfaction, the daily enthusiasm and the thrill of the chase are benefits not found anywhere else.

As we meet our personal and organizational objectives, we experience a dramatic benefit: improved effectiveness. Of course this effort needs to be integrated into our lifestyle and busy schedule. If we view our jobs as a chore, we will never accomplish what we desire.

For example, if we make a modest commitment to improve ourselves just 1% per month, through the miracle of compounding we will double our effectiveness in about five years. How many years are you planning to work? Think of the massive potential you have ahead of you!

Tiger Woods expresses his success attitude well: "The greatest thing about tomorrow is I can be better than I am today."

Steps to Effective Learning

Here is a proven, effective four-step method of self directed learning. When you complete these steps, your new actions and attitudes become permanent. We don't regress back to old habits.

Step one: Define the gap between your current reality and the behaviors, skills and traits you want to develop.

Step two: Write an action plan detailing the improvements you want to make. Writing crystallizes your thoughts and helps you focus.

Step three: Start taking action. Using the steps in your action plan, practice the skills, behaviors and traits you want to develop.

Step four: Most importantly, hold yourself accountable. "Inspect what you expect."

We must learn from professional athletes who use coaches to help them develop strengths which they know they need for their success. Too often we in the business world act alone. We can increase our success by building alliances with experts who can assist us in our development. Ask a friend, mentor or coach to work with you, show you how to do it, and hold you accountable.

Your Personal Plan

Let's personalize this discussion. Take a few moments to write the behaviors, skills or traits you would like to improve or strengthen. These four common examples will get you started:

- Many of us could become more effective communicators. Effective communication is a competitive advantage in most areas of our lives.
- Feeling appreciated is a basic human need. How many of us regularly compliment our co-workers or employees? Are we so focused on our problems and initiatives that we fail to notice the efforts of others?
- Naturally reserved people could become more effective if they could develop the capability to be more at ease when the situation warranted.
- Many managers lack the ability to effectively delegate routine tasks. We end up doing them instead of important work that will generate higher success.

Using these suggestions as a basis, determine those traits you want to strengthen and develop an action plan to work on them.

Summary

Most of us recycle our problems because we always perform and never practice.

Successful people understand that we work for ourselves. Our job offers the opportunity to advance our personal success.

We understand that regular small changes in our effectiveness will create much greater personal success.

We need to make a personal commitment to the effort necessary to increase our success and follow proven steps. The key to developing new behaviors and habits lies in practice, practice and more practice to the point of mastery.

Aristotle said it well, "We are what we repeatedly do; excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."