

# Work as a Vocation and Practice

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The companies that will thrive in the next century are the ones that see learning and change as part of the ongoing, natural evolution in organizational life. They will also recognize work, not only as the combining of certain acquired skills and abilities, but as a vocation and a practice to which we dedicate our lives. By shifting from valuing performance to valuing practice, successful companies of the 21st century will find themselves creating radically new possibilities rather than spending their energy perfecting old approaches.

## Practice is its Own Reward

We can learn a lot about practice from fine artists. Many musicians, visual artists, and writers spend as much as 95 percent of their time in practice repeating, reflecting, inquiring, noticing, and questioning as they fashion a work that expresses the rich imagery that they hold in their minds. Their struggle to bring a sense of balance, proportion, design, and beauty to their creations involves an ongoing process of experimentation, learning, skill-building, attention, and self-reflection. Equally important, through practice, artists evolve a heightened capacity for feeling and perception that makes them better able to sense the emerging possibilities of their work that were not apparent when they began. For many artists, practice is its own reward. It is not uncommon for them to devote months or years to perfecting a line of poetry or a musical phrase. Artists know that the dedication they bring to their work now is preparing and inspiring them to create even more beautiful things later on.

Fortunately, we don't have to be fine artists to reap the benefits of practice. As long as we remain curious and open to noticing our experience and how it is changing, then we are fulfilling the essential spirit of practice. We can practice anything that we do – listening to others, walking in the forest, playing a sport, or even leading an organization. When we devote this level of attention and commitment to any aspect of our lives, not only do we improve the outcome – the song we play or the product we create – we also profit by discovering within ourselves a heightened sensitivity and a new way of being present to ourselves and the world.

Thus, practice is important if we are to meet the challenges for learning, change, and innovation that have become necessary in organizations. Yet in most companies, competition and competence have taken precedence over learning and curiosity. We still spend a majority of our time performing, based on the belief that we must conform to established patterns of thinking and behavior in order to succeed. In so doing, we have separated art from work, just as we have separated wisdom from knowledge and feeling from thought.

The pressure to find and advocate one truth as being superior to all others; the belief that the scarcity of time and resources means that if one person wins, another must lose; the stress of coping with arbitrary changes of priorities and deadlines; the reliance on quantitative knowledge and information as the only basis for action – these are but a few of the tensions that distract us from practice. Instead, these forces compel us to strive toward achieving a nearly impossible level of perfection.

But there is another form of perfection that stays true to the spirit of work as a vocation and practice. It is a perfection grounded in the realization that we find the kind of originality of thinking that we associate with the creative mind through taking risks. These risks involve being open to our own failings and vulnerability. What distinguishes great artists is not talent or technique or even genius, but this willingness to dig for the source of truth, honesty, and life in their own work. In this way, our imperfections stretch us to the edge of our known capacities – and

beyond. Many artists acknowledge that their best learning comes more from reflecting on their failures than from the euphoria of success. They know that feelings of fear and vulnerability are reliable signals that they are getting close to something important.

## Leaders as Sense Makers

In the future, rather than performing to meet externally imposed demands, leaders will need to practice being sense- and pattern-makers. As such, their primary work will be to deepen their sensibilities for recognizing emerging opportunities and challenges, and to act based on ever-changing states of reality. Practice equips us to meet these challenges in several ways.

First, a life devoted to practice often pulls us away from the comfortable and the familiar. The intention of practice is not to force change; it is to prepare us to recognize and bring ourselves into alignment with the change that is already occurring around and within us. As a pianist, practice teaches me how to suspend the limiting preconceptions of the linear mind and instead have faith that my intuition will lead me where my fingers want to go next. Like piano players, leaders will also need to be adept improvisers, willing to set aside their scripts and listen for signals, follow their instincts, and imagine a future that has not yet arrived.

Second, practice cannot be rushed. It is the work of a lifetime. While acquiring knowledge and information is fast, transforming it into wisdom is slow. We begin to slow down by recognizing that many of the deadlines and pressures we experience are self-inflicted. The paradox is that when we try to speed up, we often commit errors that slow us down. This inevitably results in the need to backtrack and start over again.

Third, practice teaches us detachment. What attracts us to performance is the excitement. Practice is often done in silence. This inspired solitude aligns us with a deeper harmony within ourselves. Barbara McClintock, the renowned biologist, once said that "one must have the time to look, to have the patience to hear what

the material has to say . . . and then an openness to let it come to you" (Evelyn Fox Keller, *A Feeling for the Organism: The Life and Work of Barbara McClintock*, Freeman, 1983, p. 198). Perhaps we should be less eager to control a world we don't fully understand and practice cultivating an appreciative regard for it instead.

Practice connects us to this ancient curiosity – this relational way of knowing and of letting the world come to us. It inspires a love for beauty and an elevated sensitivity for the aesthetic dimensions of learning and change. This process represents a new and vital way of being for leaders who wish to create a positive future that calls forth the gifts, talents, and hidden potentials that are innate and natural to human beings.

*Also, see "Practicing Relevance" by Michael Jones and John Shibley in *The Dance of Change: The Challenges to Sustaining Momentum in Learning Organizations* by Peter Senge, Art Kleiner, Charlotte Roberts, Richard Ross, George Roth, and Bryan Smith (Currency Doubleday, New York 1999).*