

Practice Time Leads To Winning

The Art of Playing to Win

“For decades, great athletic teams have harbored one simple secret that only a few select business teams have discovered. It is this: To play and win together, you must practice together.”
(Lewis Edwards)

For a couple of years now I’ve been thinking, together with clients of mine that are corporate leaders, about what it is to “practice” in the corporate world and how it is that we can make that spirit and quest more a part of the process towards winning.

Athletes spend more time engaged in practice than they do playing in the games and competitions that define their success.

How a team practices, or how an athlete trains, has significant impact on whether or not there is going to be long lasting success. Athletes fully committed to winning, to finding out what they are capable of achieving, are laser focused on training and preparation. All teams and organizations in sports that have had consistent success clearly understand the need to respect practice.

“We all knew there was just one way to improve our odds for survival: train, train, train. Sometimes, if your training is properly intense it will kill you. More often -- much, much more often -- it will save your life.”
(Richard Marcinko American Business Author)

- ***Practice is for conditioning and for demonstrating sacrifice and priority.***
- ***Practice is for skill development.***
- ***Practice is for learning.***
- ***Practice is for preparing to win.***

The bullets above are four descriptions of what practice means to athletes and their coaches. The content of this document will provide insight into the four perspectives.

Practice in the corporate world can’t ever perfectly mimic a practice session in sports. So the focus will be this: ***In the corporate world any time that conditioning, skill development, sacrifice or preparation is part of the primary focus the energy of practice is happening.***

➤ **What is it to “Practice?”**

“You can't hire someone to practice for you.”
(H. Jackson Brown Jr.....Author of "Life's Little Instruction Book" Series)

The Practice Session in sports is such an integral part of the weekly routine because practice time provides an opportunity for the individual (or team) to get better at the sport being played. It's more complex than that, but at the same time it's as simple as that.

Athletes are very clear about what practice is. They have to go to practice. There is no choice in whether or not practice is going to be hard and there is no need for any athlete to really have an opinion about whether or not practice is necessary. Practice is what you do so that you will be ready to play in the games – so that you will be ready to perform. **Dedication in practice proves that you are serious about winning.**

In the corporate world we might hear the word practice more often in a sentence like this:

Practice overcoming distractions on a daily basis.

The instruction isn't to "overcome" the distractions; it's to "practice overcoming" them. The sentence implies that you are going to have to work at it and that it is going to take time to get really good at it. The spirit of the sentence is that you can get better and that if you do your life will be better.

Getting specific about trying to improve in some aspect of your work and then to work at it with the disciplined spirit of constancy is what it is to "practice" in the corporate world. "Practice" is usually not an event that one goes to in Corporate America the way an athlete does. (Although I do have clients that are seeing meetings more as practice sessions and actually calling training sessions "*Practice.*")

The following language was found at dictionary.com when I looked up the words *practice* and *practicing*.

- Repeated performance or systematic exercise for the purpose of acquiring skill or proficiency; to do or perform (something) repeatedly in order to acquire or polish a skill; to train or drill in something in order to give proficiency
- Actively working

So what is practicing in Corporate America? I think it can be viewed as a congruent exercise to the athlete's definition, if it's viewed as an ongoing effort to stay ready to win. The key question is: What is it that goes into that effort?

***"If I don't practice the way I should, then I won't play the way that I know I can."
(Ivan Lendl)***

➤ **Practice is for conditioning and for demonstrating sacrifice and priority.**

“For every finish-line tape a runner breaks -- complete with the cheers of the crowd and the clicking of hundreds of cameras -- there are the hours of hard and often lonely work that rarely gets talked about.”
(Grete Waitz Marathon Champion)

You know that conditioning and sacrifice are in place in an athlete’s practice when:

- Time is spent doing work that results in an improved level of stamina, speed, and strength. (**Efficiency Improves**)
- The athletes are fully engaged in all “drills” in a way that challenges their competitive fire. Practice provides the environment for athletes to condition themselves to know what it is to dig deep and go all out. (**Desire to Win and Belief in Oneself Improves**)
- The athlete has to contend with feelings of pressure or of failure. This engagement conditions the mind. Athletes feel negative at times in their training and during practice. The negativity is actually good because each time they overcome it quickly during a practice session they are making themselves more mentally tough for the upcoming games. (**Mental Toughness Improves**)

Example: Almost every athlete goes through the grind of wind sprints. Wind sprints are exercises that don’t require much thinking. They require grit. But more than the body is being conditioned. Confidence and desire are being conditioned. Mental toughness is improving. The warrior spirit is being shaped.

In the corporate world you are engaged in practice if you are improving efficiency – speed, stamina and strength. Aspects of efficiency that you are looking to improve are:

- Communication skills
- Product knowledge
- Capacity to execute at a quicker pace and with a decrease in errors

Good questions: How do you condition your teams to be more efficient? How do you spark competitive fire in your work in the corporate world? How do you build higher levels of mental toughness?

Do this: Talk about competitive fire. Talk about what it means to you personally. Talk about the need for it in a *Championship Style Culture*. Compliment it when it’s evident. Ask for it when it isn’t it. Practice in sports is the constant reminder of “how we play” the game. When you are mirroring this effort in the corporate world – when you are reminding your team to stay on point with “how we roll” – you are engaged in practice.

➤ **Practice is for skill development.**

*“If I miss one day of practice, I notice it. If I miss two days, the critics notice it. If I miss three days, the audience notices it.”
(Jan Paderewski Pianist, Composer)*

In a sports practice skill drills are set up to develop specific skills, but skill drills are rarely perfect simulation for game action. They are too specific in nature for them to be just like game action.

Example: To make a jump shot better in basketball, one of the ways to train is to take 50 shots in a row from the exact same spot. You would never get 50 shots in a row from the exact same spot in a real game.

Do this: Coach your people to always take ownership of their responsibility to “work on their game.” Coach your people to understand that an article or a book that they read are examples of how practice – the effort to develop skills – is not going to always “look” just like the game action looks. Just because a simulation isn’t exact doesn’t mean that skills, crucial to winning and excelling, aren’t being developed.

➤ **Practice is for learning.**

*“Practice without improvement is meaningless.”
(Chuck Knox Football Coach)*

The success that happens for athletes in games gets earned in practice and in training.

Champions never stop taking responsibility for getting better at what they do. Champion athletes respect their craft the way a great authors and musicians respect theirs. It is in practice where the great athlete is learning and mastering his craft.

- It isn’t whether you put the time in; it’s all about how you practice. (**Learn how to practice your craft the way a “pro” does.**)
- Be determined to get better. (**Learn what needs to happen on a consistent basis to actually improve your game.**)
- **Inspire yourself** because of your effort, not only because of your success. Own your momentum. (**Learn how to create feelings of positive energy for yourself.**)

Example: The smart freshman athlete on a college team watches the seniors and makes note of how they practice and train. We all can learn so much from watching what’s happening around us; watching what works and what doesn’t.

Do this: Talk to your people about “watching what works.” Always talk about learning.

➤ **Practice is for preparing to win.**

*“To give yourself the best possible chance of playing to your potential, you must prepare for every eventuality. That means practice.”
(Seve Ballesteros Champion Golfer)*

The following three points are part of a package that I send to the athlete clients of mine that hire me to improve their capacity to take command of their thought and to be mentally tough under pressure.

(How do they relate to your world in Corporate America?)

- In practice you should take advantage of the energy that comes from getting ready specifically for the upcoming competitive event. It is in practice where you make the adjustments that need to be made so that you are doing what must be done to keep winning.
- Find inspiration to win and push yourself to higher levels of performance from every aspect of practice and preparation. Be certain to enjoy how fun it is to bear down in practice because you are psyched for the chance to be on top of your game next time you compete in a game/match/competition.
- Be proud of the way that you watch everything that is going on around you. Be a better student of the game because of how you prepare during practice.

Example: In a sports environment a coach will present to his people a viewpoint of what he feels the conditions of the upcoming games will be like. As in, *“We are going into Chicago and the field is going to be a mess and the temperature is going to be freezing. Because of this we are going to need to practice every aspect of our running game to ensure that we will be ready to deal with the conditions.”*

Do this: Talk consistently to your people about putting in an effort that is going to be productive and is specific to the conditions and challenges that are evident. It isn't enough to just work hard. The effort needs to be about preparing to win.

➤ **Practice Summary**

*“I don't know if I practiced more than anybody else, but I sure practiced enough. I still wonder if somebody -- somewhere -- was practicing more than me.”
(Larry Bird)*

In a practice session in sports, the coach brings the practice plan. The coach decides what will be worked on and what has to improve. The coach makes these decisions based on what sorts of “performance capacity” exists in the team or in the individual player. The

drills in practice are always designed so that key points are reinforced; they are designed so that the athletes involved will have to challenge and stretch themselves to become better.

As a corporate leader you are creating the “spirit of practice” within your culture whenever you are:

- Customizing the training based on the evidence of what the “performance capacity” is.
- Reinforcing the keys to success
- Challenging your people to stretch themselves and to extend their effort

If what you are doing each and every day has become routine to you, if your interaction is often on autopilot, then there will be no improvement. To improve you must be giving full attention to what you are doing.

Example: When golfers go to the driving range and just hit balls without paying full attention to what they are doing there will be no improvement. But when golfers spend time at the driving range fully focused on exactly what they are doing, what they are trying to make better about their game, they will improve.

Your life and your career are the same way. You have to pay attention. You can't live on autopilot. If you do you won't improve.

Do this: Embrace the spirit of what it is to practice.

Practicing will lead to more wins.

Grittiness and belief in oneself – the kind that athletes need when under the pressure that takes place in big games – becomes a true part of the athlete's character from the “tough time” that gets put into practice and training sessions. Practice teaches athletes to be mentally tough and character tough.

*“Everything is practice.”
(Pele)*