Making Leadership Strategies Second Nature

Sally Woods, Ph.D.

Did you commit to taking your career to the next level this year? If so, can you honestly say you have integrated new leadership skills into your daily routine to the point where they have become second nature? If you have not, now is the time to take action so you can meet your personal and professional goals this quarter and this year.

Muscle memory is a familiar concept to athletes. It’s the experience your body has when performing particular actions that have been consistently practiced until they are second nature. Tennis players will isolate a particular part of their game that needs improvement, such as their backhand, and will hit hundreds of shots with that one stroke. Basketball players shoot thousands of hoop shots. Baseball pitchers will practice hundreds of pitches every day. They are all developing muscle memory and training their brain to be able to perform these activities when needed without even thinking about it. When we watch pro athletes perform, it seems effortless.

Practice to build muscle memory seems obvious in sports—after all, it’s about physicality as well as mental toughness. In fact, ease that comes with muscle memory is expected in sports. However, muscle memory and the resulting deep skills are just as important in other aspects of demanding performance such as organizational leadership.

But, practice for leaders and practice for athletes is different. Athletes practice in preparation for their game. Leadership “practice” is done real time.

For leaders, every day is game day. In a packed stadium. With high-consequence results. Amidst cheers and jeers.

No wonder it’s so difficult when you want to purposefully change your leadership style. Perhaps you want to be a more attentive listener, or be more directive, or be a more inclusive problem solver, or, better yet, be more proficient at using all of these strategies at the specific time they are needed. But you don’t want to look like a “little-league leader” while you try out new skills.

Let me pitch out a few suggestions for you to take a swing at practicing:

1. **Let people know what behaviors you are going to work on and why.**
   You may think this display of vulnerability equates with weakness. But the opposite is true. Besides, it’s probably already obvious to others that you’re
not perfect! When you tell others what you want to work on to improve your leadership, you do three things:

You visibly commit to enhance your leadership, and as a result, improve other’s experience with you—a plus for engaging your team members. You enroll champions who are poised to support you.

You lead by example, which you are doing all the time anyway, so this example shows that you value development.

2. **Purposefully use the new behavior 10 times a day for 30 days.**
   You want to create new behavior habits, but what you are really doing is rewiring your brain—creating new muscle memory for your leadership. For instance, if you want to improve your skill at using the right leadership strategy at the right time, then for the next 30 days, pause at least 10 times a day, consciously become aware of the situation and people with you in that moment, and choose your response based on what your awareness tells you would yield the best outcome. Ten times a day, every day.

3. **Ask for feedback and receive it graciously.**
   You’ve enrolled your team as your champions, so use them! Ask for feedback about what they see you doing related to the leadership skill you’re working on—both positive feedback and constructive critical feedback. In his book “Toughness,” Jay Bilas writes about receiving feedback: “When I meet criticism that is . . . factual in nature rather than a matter of taste, I ask myself two important questions: Is the criticism correct? And is the criticism reasonable? If the criticism is correct, I use it to get better, and I will thank anyone who brings it to my attention. If it is incorrect I address it in a professional manner... If it is unreasonable, I dismiss it.”

4. **Expect to have flubs and failed attempts.**
   You’re practicing in real time; so naturally, others will see your less-than-perfect attempts. As long as your flubs are not on the level of Ndamukong Suh, then you have an opportunity, in the moment of flubbing, to self-correct, use some humor aimed at yourself and get back on track.

   You absolutely can practice new leadership behaviors successfully in real time. In fact, it’s really the only time you have. Use the above practice suggestions to make new leadership strategies second nature and take your leadership to the next level and beyond.