

Welcome to

# The Science of Improvement

Whether we're flying a fighter jet or closing deals in a boardroom, we all have areas in which we could improve our performance. With the right leadership, your team has the potential to really "take-off." Let's fly!

# The Science of Improvement: Randolph Air Force Base, Texas

In this episode of Leadership University we're going to explore:

- The Open System methodology used by leaders to improve performance
- The neuroscience behind positive support and encouragement
- “Growth-Mindset” and our ability to change
- Creating strategies for improvement that have clear expectations, emphasize individual's strengths, and align with team values.

# Timeline

Your work in this episode will take approximately 2.5 hours to complete. The videos and online work will take about 1.5 hour. You will be speaking to your mentor for about 25 minutes, having a conversation with your team during a regular meeting for about 15 minutes and speaking with a junior team member for 20 minutes.

VO: Intro

# Developing, Advancing, Expanding

Whether it's your business, the people you lead, or your own performance, improvement is a key aspect of what a leader does: getting things from "here to there" and making them better. It's your job to get that plane up in the air and resist those forces that could bring you down.

# Mind the Gap

Improvement speaks to the closing of a metaphorical gap. The gap is the difference between where something is now, and where we want it to be. The difference between what we are *already* achieving (sales, growth, revenues, competencies, etc.) and what we *want* to achieve.

What is the current gap in your (or your team's) performance? Where's "here" and "there" for you?

# Video: Open System Change

# Always Room For Improvement

The nature of the human race is that we never get to “completeness” or “maturity” in the fullest sense of the word. There is always room for improvement. There is the “gap” between where we are at any given moment, the true reality, and the ideal self. None of us is perfect.

Imperfection is normal and expected. Improving oneself can be a fun opportunity to further grow and know.

# Method One: A Closed System

The problem with defining where you'd like to improve, going out and working on it as you have always done, with the level of skills and resources you already possess, is that it often fails.

Do you want to know why? Nothing has changed, you're the same person. The same methods are not going to bring about different results. Improvement will not happen by doing more of the same.

# Entropy In The Office

When it comes to managing others, a boss often just sets the goals and then rides their employees all the way: shouting at them to do (whatever it is) better, faster and cheaper. That's not a protocol that is set up for success. It's what we'd call a closed system: (The Second Law of Thermodynamics). The Second Law of Thermodynamics is commonly known as the Law of Increased Entropy. While quantity remains the same, the quality of matter/energy deteriorates gradually over time. As the disorder in the universe increases, the energy is transformed into less usable forms. Thus, the efficiency of any process will always be less than 100%. Things tend to get worse. Things have a natural drift toward chaos.

# Working Harder, Not Smarter

To get better, we need to bring something new to the table, not just continue on as we are. But, it is human nature to attempt Method One: just trying harder. We see it every day.

Where do you see this method "commit and try harder" operating in your work? What experiences have you had with giving your team a new goal and then sending them out to achieve it, assuming that they would do it with existing abilities and resources?

# Method Two: Open System

In an open system, things get better because of the introduction of new ***energy*** and new ***intelligence***.

Improvement happens when we move from only evaluating people or overseeing what they are doing, to implementing a different tactic: *initiating change by being a facilitator of better performance*. Leaders drive performance by facilitating it.

The ***energy*** fuels and propels performance forward and the ***intelligence*** tells us how.

# Video: Energy Part 1

# A Positive Relationship

A positive, supportive relationship between two people releases dopamine and serotonin into their brains. Dopamine is a neurotransmitter associated with the pleasure centers of the brain. It is responsible for feelings related to love, joy, pleasure, reward and motivation. Serotonin is also a neurotransmitter and helps to regulate mood, irritability, impulse, obsession and memory.

These kinds of positive relationships push people toward their target. Encouragement and a supportive tone fuels performance.

Where have you seen a supportive relationship help you improve?  
What did that person do?

# Support System

What can you do to be more supportive as a leader? What can you do to better emulate the supportive behaviors that you've experienced?

# Who Needs You?

Think of a team member who might need your support. In what way do they need your positive influence and how can you provide it?

# Encouragement

An adept leader recognizes when someone is not doing well, does not think they can do something, or has failed. Sometimes it just takes encouragement to turn a negative situation around.

When you were down or failing, how did having encouragement help you? What did that person do?

# Going For The Gold

A few years ago, I watched an interview with a very young Olympic gold medal winner. When asked what she attributed her performance to that year, she noted that everything changed one day as a result of a conversation she'd had with her parents. They had noticed how at times she would get nervous to the degree that it was affecting her ability to do her best.

They sat her down, she explained in the interview, and reminded her that it was OK if she made a mistake, if she didn't win, or if she blew it. They would love her just as much if she made a mistake.

She went on to say that knowing that failing was OK made her able to succeed. She didn't have to worry about what her parents were going to think.

In other words, there were no relational consequences to making a mistake. They would not shame her, be angry, hate her, or withdraw support. So she was free to use every mistake as a learning opportunity and free to do the best she could at any moment. That is what people need from their leaders, the knowledge that their leader is for their success, and if a mistake is made, that leader will stand beside them and help them learn and improve, not punish them.

# Ongoing Support

If she hadn't known that her parents were for her, supporting her, and going through the journey with her, she may not have won the gold. Failures were inevitable, but she had to keep learning and trying. Her parents were working "*for*" her and pushing her to get better with positive energy.

When have you felt like someone was "for" you, like they were your champion? How can you channel that feeling toward your team?

# Video: Energy Part 2

# Challenge

Help me out with a quick mini-exercise. There are only two steps.

- 1) Stand and reach up as high as you can.
- 2) Now give me two more inches.

# Stretch Yourself

Were you able to reach just a little bit higher on the second try?

# Move Beyond What's Expected

You have to ask your people to do more, to go further than they ever have, both qualitatively and quantitatively. Provide them with the support so they can do more than they think they're capable of doing.

Think about a time in your personal or professional life when you rose to the occasion because you were challenged. Who challenged you well? How did they do it?

# Bring It On

What outside sources of challenge could you bring to the table? Which elements of competition could make it more fun or more motivating?

# Energize

Push things forward. Move into the process and drive people upward at the proper intervals.

How has someone's energy helped you? How can you speak energy into the ones that you lead? Who and when?

# Mentor Minutes

Your mentor likely has some expertise in inspiring and energizing you. (Hopefully you chose a mentor that isn't yawn-inducing. If so, find a new one.)

Contact your mentor and set up a time for a 20-30 minute conversation.

Ask: When trying to make a positive change (from bad to good or from good to great), what did you do to inspire and energize your team? How did you push forward against the obstacles? What activities turned the tide? How did you bring out the best in people? Summarize their responses.

# New Strategies

Which of your mentor's ideas do you plan to incorporate in your own work? How?

# Ideas To Grow On

We know from research, particularly the work of psychologist Carol Dweck, that those who possess a “growth mindset” rather than a “fixed mindset” are more likely to be able to achieve goals and improve. People with a growth mindset see talent as something that can be developed and improved, not as an innate, fixed asset that doesn’t change over time. The way I like to think of this is what researchers have termed, “mastery goals.” You are focused on trying to get better and master something, rather than thinking that you’re either good at it or you aren’t.

Researcher Heidi Grant Halvorson actually calls them “get-better” goals, a great way to think about them. In a get-better mindset, we’re always trying to improve, asking ourselves, OK, what could I do a little better? What can I learn for next time? This mindset should not be limited to post-failure moments either, but maintained in the midst of difficulties as well. People who are committed to mastery don’t freak out (as much) when they hit an obstacle. They reassess and then get going again, thinking they can get better.

# Like Minded Growth

Those with a growth mindset believe that people can change. They have a developmental bias in the way that they see other people—not as they are now but as they can be. Science has shown that we can change. We get better, but we tend to do it alongside people who believe that too and who are committed to helping us.

At your next team meeting, briefly discuss the growth mindset and how it relates to your team's improvement. What were their reactions and suggestions?

# Video: Intelligence

# Know Where We Are Going

We have to know where “there” is. Your team needs to know what you’re expecting from them. It has to be clearly stated.

Do you feel that your team has a clear understanding of the *directions* and *benchmarks* that are needed to get better?

# It's Time To Find Out

Ask a junior team member to meet with you for 15 minutes. Tell them you're working through a leadership program and that their answers won't be held against them. You're seeking honest responses to help the team improve. Be sure to take notes.

Ask: What are the goals of our team? What are the expectations for your role? How do we measure success? What are your ideas for helping our team to improve? What can I do to help?

Note their reflections.

# On Target?

His or her feedback tells you how clearly you've communicated your expectations and team culture. How did you feel about their responses? Were there surprises? What improvements can you make based on their reactions?

# Ongoing Feedback

Getting feedback from your team can't just be a one time occurrence. When you're a pilot, you have to know what the plane is doing at all times. Continuous feedback lets people know how they are doing along the way. It's as immediate as possible without being overwhelming or redundant.

Feedback is a two-way street. You need to give it to your team and they need to give it to you. How have you established the communication line within your team? How can it be improved?

# Structure

The word “structure” finds its roots in the Latin *struere*, “to build.” It is defined by Webster’s as “the action of building,” or “something arranged in a definite pattern of organization.” As a verb, the word means “to construct or arrange according to a plan; give a pattern or organization to.” Isn’t that what we’re talking about here—both the what and the how? Improving performance is exactly that. You will have to build abilities by arranging them in a definite pattern of organization.

Think about your team is structured. How is the arrangement of your team’s abilities contributing to growth? How could it be improved?

# Skills Building And Education

We have to be informed to do it differently. Better performance requires better skills and new learning.

How will the people you lead learn and get the input to do it better? Where will new "know-how" and new skills be gained? What skills do they need? How will you require this and resource it? Think in terms of formal and informal learning and skills development methods. List some thoughts and ideas:

# Discipline

Discipline is both the habitual behavior required to master an activity (such as learning a musical instrument) and the correction of people when they stray off course. It's providing the structure to help them to change.

Think of a team member who may be going off track. What action can you take to help them get back on track? Are corrections, and possibly even some consequences necessary?

# Play To People's Strengths

People do better on a task that suits their performance strengths. Find out what your team members are good at and get them into that space.

Pause and think about one or two members of your team. What skills have they demonstrated excellence in that may not be immediately within their job description? (Ex. Tony is an excellent copy-editor or Iris is a really great presenter.) How can these strengths be leveraged to further push performance in the team?

# Values

Improvement cannot be at the expense of values. The improvement path is a great time to drive home the integration of values. If your company values flexible scheduling, then creating numerous mandatory meetings in the name of improvement may be contradictory.

Are you coaching and aligning values along the way as you are asking for improvement?

# Quarantine The Weaknesses

You can't fix everyone or everything. If someone is disorganized, you have to sequester that behavior so it doesn't slow things down for everyone. It can't be allowed to infect what you're trying to do. Make sure that someone's weaknesses (especially your own) won't keep success from happening.

Think of a time when your own weaknesses have derailed your efforts. Can you see how that is a real possibility? What, looking back, would have helped to keep that from happening? Bringing in someone else? Delegating some things? Support?

# Define The Obstacles

What will get in the way of improvement? Schedules, resources, competitors, politics, bad management? Great performers define the obstacles and have a plan to overcome the obstacles when they occur.

What is going to get in the way (both internally and externally)? How will you deal with those obstacles? How will you equip others to deal with those obstacles?

# The Plan

## Create An Open System Plan

Think of our two ingredients: energy and intelligence.

For each person or business or team that needs improvement, make a simple plan based on those two ingredients. What will you provide in each category?

1) Energy

2) Intelligence

# Remember...

Evaluate yourself using the real drivers of ultimate results. Look for improvement along those significant measures, not perfection or immediate wins.

No leader is immune to losses, bad quarters, bad years, bad reviews, or product failures. It is part of the game, and part of getting it right.

What matters is how you learn from these challenges and use them to improve. Focus on the things that are going to drive improvement.

Do not let any one loss tell you who you are or what your potential or future is. If you do, your brain functioning will change, and you will perform at a lower level. Positive emotions push positive results.

Video: Outro