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3. Collegiate leadership competition: an opportunity for deliberate practice on the road to expertise

Scott J. Allen, Arthur J. Schwartz and Daniel M. Jenkins

PURPOSE

The purpose of collegiate leadership competition (CLC) is to create a practice field for leadership learning and education by incorporating the fundamentals of deliberate practice as a theoretical base. Our work is grounded in two assumptions. First, that students engaging in deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993; Ericsson and Pool, 2016) will greatly accelerate their learning, both in and out of the classroom. A second assumption is that students like to compete, and competition can serve as another high-impact educational practice (Kuh, 2008). These two fundamental assumptions set apart CLC from other leadership learning opportunities.

In addition to a focus on deliberate practice, CLC uses the KNOW, SEE, PLAN, DO model of development (Allen et al., 2014):

- KNOW: obtaining declarative knowledge of terms, concepts, facts and theories.
- SEE: identifying and recognizing the concepts in others or the environment.
- PLAN: integrating existing knowledge to develop a plan of action.
- DO: intervening skillfully when carrying out the plan of action (p. 30).

Intentional and deliberate opportunities for reflection throughout help individuals make sense of their experience and develop schemas (as in mental representations) that aid in their future work (Schwandt, 2005; Ericsson and Pool, 2016).

EXPERTISE AND DELIBERATE PRACTICE

What Separates an Expert From a Novice?

> "Leadership development is therefore closer conceptually to what it takes to become an expert rather than acquiring a particular skill."
> Day et al. (2009)

The theoretical foundation of our work is heavily rooted in the expertise literature that has focused in two primary areas – what separates an expert from a novice, and *how* expertise is trained or developed. While Ericsson et al. (1993) identify many dimensions that separate an expert from a novice (for example, motivation to learn/energy, location relative to resources and coaching, available time, parental/institutional support), we focus on four primary differences, as set out below.

First, the expert will *know* more about the domain than others (Bransford et al., 2000; Sternberg, 1995). There is a great deal of declarative knowledge on the topic – information, facts, theory, history and so forth. Many would suggest that declarative knowledge must be present before "higher order" learning can occur (Bloom, 1985; Kraiger et al., 1993). Combined with experience and practice, the knowledge and behaviors required of a leader become more procedural, which aids in speed and automaticity (Ericsson and Pool, 2016; Glaser and Chi, 1998; Day et al., 2009).

A second difference between experts and novices is their ability to see patterns and chunks of information while engaging in an activity (Merriam and Cafarella, 1999; Glaser and Chi, 1998). To the untrained eye, these stimuli may appear random or confusing (Ericsson and Pool, 2016). Experts have the ability to rely upon their knowledge and experience to draw upon mental models (or mental representations) that help them to understand better the problem or challenge (Mumford et al., 2009). For instance, Clarke and Mackaness (2001) found in their exploratory study that senior professionals relied more heavily than younger professionals on experience and previous outcomes. Such mental representations "make it possible to process large amounts of information quickly [. . .] one could define a mental representation as a conceptual structure designed to sidestep the usual restrictions that short-term memory places on mental processing" (Ericsson and Pool, 2016, p.61).

A third difference is that experts often have superior planning skills (Ericsson et al., 2007; Mumford et al., 2009). Because of their knowledge and diagnostic abilities, they often spend more time defining the problem and scenario planning different options (Glaser and Chi, 1998; Simon, 1973). Thus, "declarative knowledge becomes proceduralized through

practice and experience" and "knowledge about situations, responses, and outcomes is integrated in ways that provide context-specific rules for application" (Day et al., 2009, pp.177–8). When faced with ill-structured (Voss and Post, 1998) or adaptive challenges (Heifetz and Linsky, 2002) the planning process becomes a critical ingredient for success or failure.

Finally, expertise yields concrete results (Ericsson et al., 2007). Experts not only bring forth better decision-making processes than novices, they yield better results on a consistent basis (Johnson, 1988).

How is Expertise Developed?

> "Not all practice makes perfect. You need a particular kind of practice – *deliberate practice* – to develop expertise."
> Ericsson et al. (2007)

A natural question in the dialogue about what separates experts from novices is "*how* did they attain the highest levels of performance?" Some of the earliest work on the topic stemmed from the work of Bloom (1985) who, through a series of retrospective interviews with world-class performers, found that:

> Exceptional levels of talent development require certain types of environmental support, special experiences, excellent teaching, and appropriate motivational encouragement at each stage of development. No matter what the quality of initial gifts, each of the individuals studied went through many years of special development under the care of attentive parents and the tutelage and supervision of a remarkable series of teachers and coaches [. . .] All the talented individuals we interviewed invested considerable practice and training time, which rivaled the time devoted to school or any other activity. (p. 543)

Building on the work of Bloom, in 1993 Ericsson et al. (1993) concluded that it is *deliberate practice* that separates world-class performers from novices. The authors concluded that deliberate practice involves components such as motivation to learn, access to coaching and feedback, a structured curriculum, considerable time (upward of four to five hours each day), and engagement in activities outside of one's current ability level. In 2016, Ericsson and Pool published several criteria for an intervention to be considered deliberate practice. We highlight below the most essential components and after each item we provide a short comment that, based on our experience, highlights how traditional approaches to leadership development converge or diverge from the deliberate practice tenets described by Ericsson and his colleagues.

Deliberate Practice . . .

1. "requires a field that is already reasonably developed – that is, a field in which the best performers have attained a level of performance that clearly sets them apart from people who are just entering the field" (p. 98). Ericsson and Pool also emphasize the need for objective criteria upon which superior performers can be judged.

   Comment: While there are individuals who have attained "roles" at the highest levels of societal and organizational life, there are currently no widely agreed-upon "objective criteria for superior performance" or archetypes for leadership. Thus, it is challenging to set apart experts from novices.
2. "requires a teacher who can provide practice activities designed to help a student improve his or her performance [. . .] in particular, deliberate practice is informed and guided by the best performers' accomplishments and by an understanding of what these expert performers do to excel. Deliberate practice is purposeful practice that knows where it is going and how to get there" (p. 99).

   Comment: Because the field lacks a clear understanding of objective criteria, it is difficult to determine *who* the ideal models are when discussing leadership. As a result, it is often difficult to define "where it is going, and how to get there".
3. "develops skills that other people have already figured out how to do and for which effective training techniques have been established" and has "teachers to provide beginners with the correct fundamental skills in order to minimize the chances that the student will have to relearn those fundamentals skills later when at a more advanced level" (p. 99).

   Comment: Consensus on a widely understood and agreed-upon set of skills has not yet been determined (Riggio, 2013). While a number of studies have identified themes of content (for example, decision making, emotional intelligence, communication skills, transformational leadership), training techniques are underdeveloped and rarely result in expert levels of performance. Likewise, the "fundamentals" have not yet been outlined and agreed upon. Ask 30 theorists "where development is going, and how to get there" and one will likely get 30 different answers.
4. Requires a practice regimen "that should be designed and overseen by a teacher or coach who is familiar with the abilities of expert performers and how those abilities can be best developed" (p. 99).

Comment: A practice field for leadership development does not exist. Most "practice" occurs in teams, groups, organizations and communities while an individual is engaged in the work. As a result, there is rarely an educated "teacher" to guide development and growth on a consistent basis.

5. "takes place outside one's comfort zone and requires a student to constantly try things that are just beyond his or her current abilities. Thus, it demands near-maximal effort, which is generally not enjoyable" (p. 99).

   Comment: Without a clear picture of superior performance, a list of the subsequent skills, representative "ideal" performers, a practice field, and educated coaches to build skill, it is difficult to push individuals to work beyond their current abilities.

6. "involves well-defined, specific goals and often involves some aspect of the target performance; it is not aimed at some vague overall improvement. Once an overall goal has been set, a teacher or coach will develop a plan for making a series of small changes that will add up to the desired, larger change" (p. 99).

   Comment: In addition to the items listed in the *Comment* to 5, above, leadership development rarely has a specific target for development and growth. Unlike swimming, diving, or track and field, it is difficult to objectively measure an individual's decision-making abilities or communication style. However, some organizations such as Toastmasters have attempted to do so.

7. "requires a person's full attention and conscious actions. It isn't enough to simply follow a teacher's or coach's directions. The student must concentrate on the specific goal for his or her practice activity so that adjustments can be made to control practice" (p. 99).

   Comment: In the current context, rarely does an individual have the luxury of focusing solely on a specific goal or practice activity.

8. "involves feedback and modifications of efforts in response to that feedback. Early in the training process much of the feedback will come from the teacher or coach, who will monitor progress, point out problems, and way to address those problems" (p. 99).

   Comment: Without a clear picture of superior performance, a list of the subsequent skills, representative "ideal" performers, a practice field, and educated coaches to build skill, it will be difficult to provide expert feedback on performance.

9. "both produces and depends on effective mental representations. Improving performance goes hand in hand with improving mental

> representations; as one's performance improves, the representations become more detailed and effective, in turn making it possible to improve even more. Mental representations make it possible to monitor how one is doing, both in practice and in actual performance. They show the right way to do something and allow one to notice when doing something wrong and to correct it" (pp. 99–100).
>
> *Comment:* Without a clear picture of superior performance, a list of the subsequent skills, representative "ideal" performers, a practice field, and educated coaches to build skill, it will be difficult to produce effective mental representations.

While some could view the current state as "bleak" we would suggest that the opportunity for exploration is an exhilarating proposition. Leadership educators have an opportunity to build and develop learning interventions that truly develop leadership capabilities across multiple dimensions (cognitive, behavioral, humanistic, constructivist).

COLLEGIATE LEADERSHIP COMPETITION

Some reading this text might wonder if it is even possible to develop expertise in an area as broad as leadership. Ericsson and Pool (2016) themselves suggest:

> [P]retty much anything in which there is little or no direct competition, such as gardening and other hobbies, for instance, and many of the jobs in today's workplace – business manager, teacher, electrician, engineer, consultant and so on. These are not areas where you're likely to find accumulated knowledge about deliberate practice, simply because there are no objective criteria for superior performance (p. 98).

The sentiments of Ericsson and Pool, along with the seemingly paltry alignment with their requirements for deliberate practice, leaves leadership development in an exciting place for exploration.

The CLC was founded to explore this underdeveloped space. In the most general sense, the CLC was founded to create a "practice field" and competitive outlet for leadership studies, training, education and development (Allen and Shehane, 2016). By doing so, we have been challenged to explore many of the required elements of deliberate practice mentioned in the previous section.

The CLC uses the KNOW, SEE, PLAN, DO (KSPD) model of development (Allen et al., 2014). Rooted in the expertise literature

(for example, Ericsson and Pool, 2016; Glaser and Chi, 1998), KSPD proposes that learning and development occurs as learners: (1) acquire declarative knowledge about leadership; (2) use the knowledge to see or diagnose dynamics in the group or environment; (3) use knowledge and their diagnosis to plan a course of action, and, ultimately (4) skillfully intervene (Meissen, 2010) to achieve their objectives.

In addition, the CLC is committed to working toward the objective of providing students with an opportunity to engage in deliberate practice. While we have a long way to go, we would suggest that by creating the competition and a practice field for developing leadership we are on our way to identifying: a better picture of superior performance, a list of the subsequent skills, representative "ideal" performers, a practice field, and educated coaches who provide deliberate instruction. In addition to challenging students to work outside their comfort zone, we are allowing the time, repetition and real-time feedback necessary to (better) develop expertise.

An Overview

CLC, a non-profit organization founded in 2015, creates a dynamic practice field that stretches students and coaches to the boundaries of their knowledge, skills and abilities. CLC makes leadership a real, tangible experience for the next generation of corporate and organizational leaders. Headquartered in Ohio, USA, the CLC has one executive director and three board members who set the strategy and provide day-to-day resource development and organization. Currently, the CLC hosts four regional competitions (Great Lakes, Southern Ohio, Philadelphia, New England) of eight teams from various colleges and universities. An objective of the organization is to have an international presence by 2020.

Team Recruitment

Each fall, a team of six students at each college/university is recruited to participate. Coaches use a wide variety of techniques to recruit their teams. Representative techniques include: hand-picking excellent students; offering a "for credit" course; securing nominations from faculty; hosting tryouts; making an open call; and choosing students from in-tact groups on campus (for example, student clubs/organizations; student government). Coaches clearly outline the commitment and practice schedule for the winter/spring term (January–April each year).

Coach Development

At the time that a university agrees to participate, they also identify a faculty or staff member who is eager to "coach" their CLC team. Coaches are provided with opportunities for face-to-face training, one-on-one support and group phone calls. Coaches also provide support leading up to the competition as they work to prepare their team for the regional competition. CLC provides team coaches with all of the tools and resources to recruit teams, plan practice and prepare for the competition.

Team Development/Training

All teams are provided with the list of the CLC Terms & Concepts (roughly 85 unique concepts), which serve as the foundation for the competition. CLC does not endorse or prioritize any one set of theories (such as transformational leadership, servant leadership). The goal is to provide the students with an introduction to an integrated (Boyer, 1990) perspective on leadership. Practices are held on each college/university's respective campus from January through April. Over the four-month period, participants and coaches learn and practice leadership topics such as decision making, presentation skills, followership, navigating stress, influencing others, leadership styles, followership and team dynamics.

For instance, one term, SOLVE, provides participants with a simple process for problem solving when faced with a challenge or task. As with the CLC Terms & Concepts, SOLVE becomes a focus of deliberate practice for participants. As with many other CLC Terms & Concepts, SOLVE is an integrative representation of multiple models from the decision-making literature (for example, Guo, 2008; Nutt, 1999; Hammond et al., 2002; Beyth-Marom et al., 1991). The term SOLVE and its corresponding set of concepts (items in bold) are described as follows:

> A core activity of leadership is problem solving. The SOLVE acronym provides a simple model to help the leader and team navigate the challenges ahead. First, it's critical to ***Set roles*** – who will lead? Who will keep time? What role will each person take in the activity? Next it's important to ***Outline the problem***. This means that the group has a clear understanding of the task at hand. A hallmark of this stage is there are a number of questions as the group tries to truly understand what it's trying to accomplish. Once the group has a clear understanding of the task's parameters, it can begin ***Listing strategies*** for completion. Once multiple strategies have been listed, the group can ***Veer toward consensus*** and continue to ***Evaluate results*** even as they implement the chosen strategy. It's not rare that the group will need to readjust if the chosen approach is not working. It's important to note that this process does not need to take a great deal of time. A skilled leader will move the group quickly through the process and have an

> acute awareness when the group (or certain members) has skipped a step or has not given a phase enough time and attention.

Another term, STYLES, is an integrated representation of several leadership styles outlined in the literature (Goleman, 2000; Vroom, 2000; Blanchard et al., 1985). As an example of how the CLC Terms & Concepts integrate with one another, a goal would be to help students practice being intentional and aware of their leadership STYLES while also moving through SOLVE when taking the team through a task or challenge. The hypothesis is that if we can help participants be more intentional (for example, using a simple problem-solving model *and* the appropriate leadership style(s) for the context) students will better perform when serving in formal and informal leadership roles. The term STYLES and its corresponding set of concepts (items in bold) are described as follows:

> There are six basic styles or approaches an individual can use when leading others. Each of these styles has benefits and drawbacks depending on the context. Skilled individuals will *intentionally choose* an appropriate style for the situation. The first style, ***Share your vision***, is an authoritative approach whereby the leader has the knowledge or a clear vision for how the group should proceed. The second style, ***Teach and coach***, requires the leader to convey their knowledge to the others on the team. This approach takes time, but builds capacity and depth among team members, which in the long run, will save time. The third style, ***Yell, tell, and the hard sell***, is a coercive style of leadership. An individual using this style, really wants *their* way and will do what it takes to ensure that the group complies with their directives. A leader who ***Listens and engages others***, is more democratic in their style. They are seeking the wisdom or knowledge of the group and building ownership in the path forward. At times leaders need to "raise the heat" and ***Energize and push*** their team to work above and beyond. This style is often associated with time constraints and high necessity for results. At times, leaders need to ***Simply delegate*** tasks and keep an eye on progress. By delegating tasks, leaders can build capacity in their teams, increase the shared workload, and accomplish more in less time. In the end, each style has benefits and drawbacks that will be important for a CLC team to explore.

Each of the 85 CLC Terms & Concepts are supported by a video of explanation, and a list of activities and support materials (such as activities, rubrics) for coaches. Curricular resources are delivered to coaches and students via the CLC Mobile App so all participants and coaches have access to the same information regarding content.

Weekly practices are a combination of team building, experiential activities/group challenges, reflection, discussions and planning. Each week the training session is designed to be challenging, fun and, most importantly, an opportunity for the students to reflect and recognize that they are developing new skills. In short, each practice should place

students at the boundary of their knowledge, skills and abilities. In doing so, students and coaches work to understand the challenges they face, which include individual and team skill building, interdependence, synthesis, and the common goal/challenge of the competition.

Most teams practice about 90-120 minutes each week and there is a CLC rule that teams cannot practice for more than 45 hours between January and the date of the competition (April). The time limit is designed to provide a level playing field between the curricular (as in received course credit for participating) and co-curricular (as in did not receive course credit) teams.

A primary goal of the team development and education is building a level of *intentionality* in the students via the use of deliberate practice. For example, the goal is that students intentionally move through the problem-solving model (SOLVE), implement an appropriate leadership style (STYLE) and, in a general sense, skillfully intervene as they work to navigate the various challenges and puzzles. In other words, they engage in the KNOW, SEE, PLAN, DO process. For instance, while engaged in a challenge, a student uses his or her knowledge of potential leadership STYLES to diagnose the need, and identify an appropriate approach for the situation. Next, his or her goal is to behaviorally engage the team in a skillful manner (as in *Energize and push*).

Along with the formal learning, a goal of CLC is to build the team and energize students about the opportunity to represent their college or university. In addition, participants have mentioned that potential employers have been highly interested in learning more about their experience when interviewing for jobs and internships.

The Competition

Competitions and performances are high-impact educational experiences (see Kuh, 2008 – Collaborative Assignments and Projects). The competition weekend begins on a Friday evening with a dinner, speaker, and an opportunity for participants to mingle and build relationships. Friday evening also serves as an opportunity to set expectations and train judges who are independent reviewers assigned to monitor progress, validate results and ensure a fair process for all participants. The competition runs from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on a Saturday and, like the weekly practice, is a series of activities and group challenges. Coaches are not allowed to coach their teams during activities but have plenty of time to debrief with the group in between activities.

Competition Judging – What is Effective Leadership?

A major challenge we have worked to overcome is clarifying "effective leadership" for judging purposes. As per Ericsson and Pool's (2016) point, there needs to be objective criteria upon which superior performers can be judged. This brings forward an interesting conversation about the competition that we have struggled to reconcile – are we judging individual performances of "leaders" for each given task, or are we judging how the team performed? Or, are we simply recording a "winner" and assuming that the winning team's mastery of the CLC Terms & Concepts must have been superior? We have tested rubrics that focus on the individual leader, the team, and specific CLC Terms & Concepts. And while we have experimented with different tactics, we have yet to land on the approach that feels best. How we "judge" individuals and teams continues to be a puzzle that we will explore. We reflect upon this challenge in greater depth in the next section.

REFLECTIONS

Perhaps the most important reflection is the need to create a better picture of superior performance, a list of the subsequent skills, representative "ideal" performers and educated coaches to train participants. This is a ripe area for research and inquiry. Ultimately, our goal is to quantitatively and qualitatively improve performance. And while this endeavor is far from realized, our ultimate goal is to prepare men and women to lead with greater intentionality. In the coming year, we have an opportunity to identify some "best practices" in outstanding performers and begin to capture video and descriptive information on their process.

Following our most recent competition, the board and staff had time to review feedback and reflect on strengths and weaknesses of the competition. Several themes emerged as areas of focus for 2016–17. And while there is a great deal of energy and passion from coaches and participants alike, we know there is a great deal of learning and experimentation ahead:

1. *Competition judging* – the challenge around judging is threefold. First, there is a need to recruit independent and educated evaluators who can observe a team's process, ensure ethical behavior and validate results. In the first couple of years these roles were occupied by individuals from participating schools, and there is a clear need for an objective and for independent volunteers in order to ensure fairness.

Second, as mentioned, there needs to be clear and balanced judging criteria. In our first year, judges utilized a rubric that evaluated the team, the assigned leader (each student "leads" at least one activity on the day of the competition) and the results of the group's efforts. Upon completion of an activity, the judges collaborated with one another to agree upon a "winner." They also provided each team leader with written feedback. In our second year of competition, the criteria revolved around a "winner" – the team that implemented the best strategy to achieve results. In the end, both approaches had serious limitations – the first was not efficient and focused almost entirely on process, and the second focused too heavily on results. Our hunch is that results *along with* team and leader process are each important elements. We are still searching for a happy medium – judging criteria that prioritizes process and implementation of CLC Terms & Concepts *and* implementing the best strategy (results). Regardless, we have learned that clarity and fairness are *very* important to coaches and students alike – and rightfully so.

Third, we need to better train judges on the CLC Terms & Concepts, the judging criteria, their role as judges, the competition content/activities, and potential challenges and pitfalls. This is a major area of focus that we will work to clarify in the coming year.

2. *Innovative/creative challenges* – there is a general sense among the team that we need to achieve a new level of innovation and creativity around the tasks and challenges presented to the students. Traditional team-building activities such as *egg drop* and *marshmallow challenge* have been overused. There is a need to incorporate technology and develop dozens of new and innovative challenges and puzzles for teams to work through in practice and in the competition.
3. *Managing emotions in coaches and participants* – while there were only six teams involved in the second year of competition, emotions ran high among the 36 participants. In fact, the experience was an emotional roller-coaster for many involved. We have an opportunity to better prepare participants and coaches for the highs and lows of the experience.
4. *Reflection/meaning making* – based on the previous reflection, we need to prioritize reflection and meaning making during the competition in a more intentional manner. In our first year, reflection during the competition was a major priority, but in year two, we placed more priority on "winning." As a result, during the competition, students became fixated on "winning" the challenge versus the learning. We need to ensure that participants and coaches alike have time to pause, connect their experience to the CLC Terms & Concepts, and make informed and intentional decisions about how to proceed.

5. *Ensuring ethical behavior* – in our second year of competition, organizers were somewhat taken aback at the accusations by students and coaches of unethical behavior in the other teams. As with many sports, in the heat of competition, some individuals and coaches worked at the edge of acceptable behavior and organizers were caught "flat-footed" as problems and issues arose throughout the day. Role clarity among judges and a clear process for dispelling such challenges is a key area for reflection and planning. Ethics *should* be everyone's responsibility – the coaches, students, CLC staff, judges – and the individual dynamics as well as those of the team leader and/or coach have an impact on the ethics of the team members. Conversations about sportsmanship and ethical behavior need to be highlighted before and after the competition.
6. *Coach development and training* – some areas of training and education have entire paradigms associated with *how* a coach approaches developing expertise (for example, in music there is Suzuki, Orff, Kodaly, Dalcroze). As the CLC matures and further develops its unique methodology (KNOW, SEE, PLAN, DO), we need to ensure that we adequately train and communicate our approach to coaches, participants and judges. It is likely this will be a combination of face-to-face, online and one-on-one coaching to ensure that new coaches are set up for success.

KEY TIPS

The activity of designing a leadership competition has been a challenging and rewarding experience. In many ways, the process challenges program architects to become clear on many of the attributes of deliberate practice outlined by Ericsson and Pool (2016). And while a great number of courses, training sessions and educational interventions propose to develop leadership in participants, few, if any, truly provide an opportunity for deliberate practice.

Perhaps the greatest tip we can provide is: if you choose to experiment with competitions as a way to develop leadership, be prepared to work at your edge. The work can be messy, confusing and ill-defined – much like the process of leadership itself! However, when students make comments such as – "I learned so much about myself!" or "I have never felt more challenged in my life but I learned a lot that will help me in life" – it makes it all worth it.

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