

White Paper

Daily Habits of Exceptional Leaders

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DAILY HABITS OF EXCEPTIONAL LEADERS

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BACKGROUND

In 2014, Pdraig O’Sullivan and Roma Gaster, Partners of the Leadership Circle based in Sydney, Australia, led a groundbreaking study into revealing and understanding the daily habits of exceptional leaders. In effect, the study uncovered what exact habits have these leaders cultivated outside of work that allows them to turn up in work in their leadership positions and – in the eyes of others- lead in an exceptional manner.

In 2011 Theresa Amabile and Stephen Kramer had published a research study called The Progress Principle which was nominated by The Harvard Business Review as a breakthrough idea in 2010. In this study, Theresa and her colleagues had used online diaries for four months asking participants about motivation factors at work. What was intriguing was because of the use of online diaries as opposed to paper-based diaries they were able to capture over 12,000 journal entries in a four-month period. The use of technology was able to very efficiently and effectively capture large amounts of data. The other thing that was intriguing about the study was the use of online diaries meant data was captured in relatively real time. One of the downsides of doing qualitative studies where people are asked their opinions about subjects is that over time people’s memories of events get filtered. The real-time understanding of events can sometimes be minimized as the time distance between them gets lengthened. This was of interest to Pdraig and Roma.

Another idea at the time of interest was the work of Andrew S Erickson the psychologist who studied Mastery. Although Erikson’s study has been misquoted with the simplified notion that 10,000 hours of practice leads to mastery in anything, his underlying study revealed habits of leading violinist’s compared to their colleagues. They wondered would technology enable the gathering of the specific intentions and habits exceptional leaders committed to on a daily basis. If that were to be true then what could we learn from understanding the mindful intentionality of these leaders that, through daily practice or habit formations, allows them to end up as exceptional leaders.

STUDY HYPOTHESIS

The working hypothesis for this study included several assumptions:

On a regular basis, exceptional leaders:

- Develop and practice daily habits or rituals and they deploy them to ensure they lead effectively. They may even be unaware of these habits or rituals.
- Make decisions, probably daily, aligned with the overall strategic aims of the organization and their role. They are overtly mindful of the need to stay aligned and on track. They develop a decision-making process to ensure continual alignment when making critical decisions.
- Reflect more frequently than average leaders and utilize ‘intentional reflection’ i.e. actively reflecting on specific outcomes or behaviors.
- Are more aware of their Reactive tendencies and strive to actively manage themselves in situations where they could potentially derail.

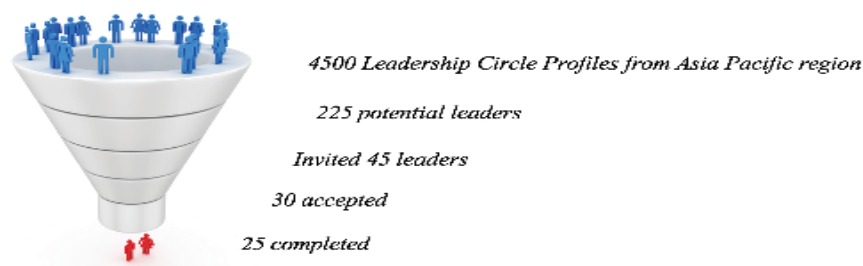
- Measure their leadership worth by understanding the impact they are having and need to have to attain the desired outcomes.

It was felt that on one level these assumptions might be obvious. Anecdotal evidence from hundreds of coaching hours with gifted and effective leaders suggested these assumptions to be true. However it was also felt that this in depth real time study had never been carried out before so this was a worthwhile endeavor. Validating the assumptions or uncovering new ones would lead to deliberate practises when supporting leaders to become more effective in their self development. To see the live presentation of the original study, [click here](#).

WHAT IS AN EXCEPTIONAL LEADER?

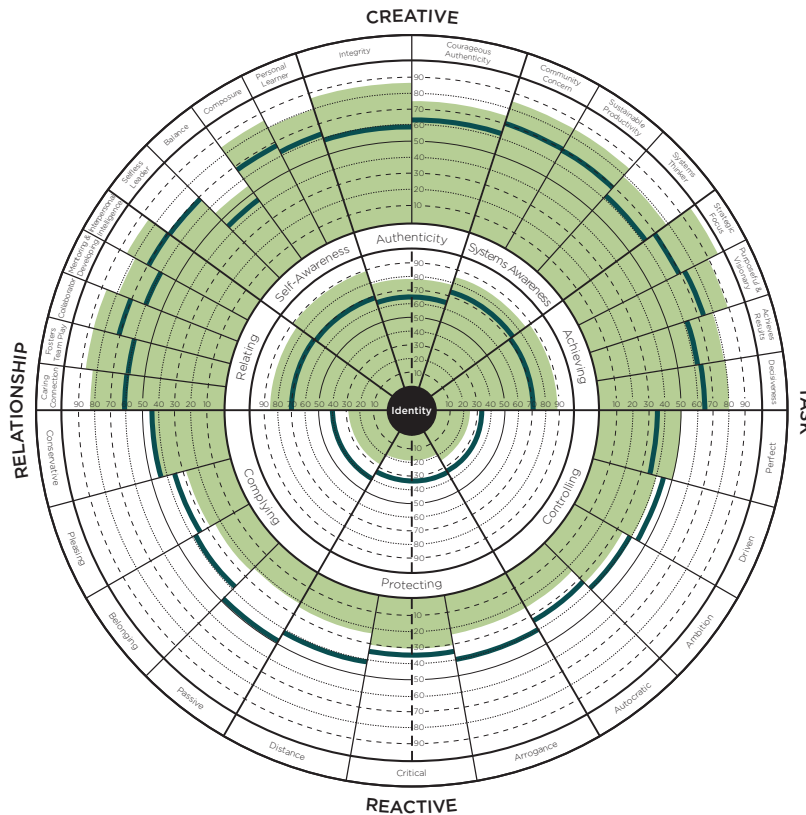
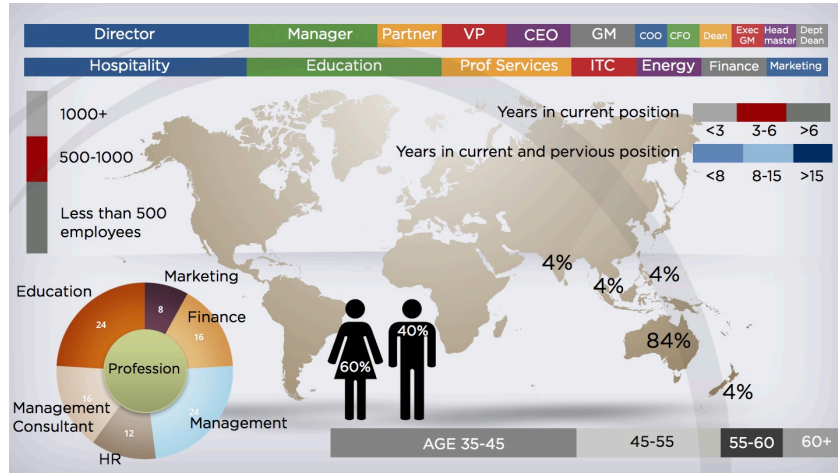
To be eligible, leaders had to have undertaken the Leadership Circle Profile™ 360 and therefore were rated by others. Their organization in the sense of evaluators being direct reports, peers, customers, colleagues had rated these leaders and suggested their leadership was of a very high quality. The three stages of leadership, Reactive, Creative and Integral, suggest the total number of exceptional leaders would fall between the 5 to 7% of all leaders who had completed Leadership Circle Profiles. A criterion was developed to further filter for exceptional leaders. We deemed that they had to achieve 80% or above across the creative competencies, the creative reactive scale and the leadership effectiveness scale. We also deemed that they needed to have scored 50% or below in the reactive tendencies. In order to access organizational leaders as opposed to coaches and consultants who had their own practice we decided they had to have a business matrix such as leadership of a team, profit and loss or some budget responsibilities.

The total pool of exceptional leaders in the Asia Pacific region who had completed the Leadership Circle Profile by 2013 was 4,500. Applying the criteria as outlined above that allowed access to potentially 225 leaders of whom 45 were personally invited to participate in the study. 30 accepted. We asked them to complete a diary at least twice a day for 21 days straight involving a large degree of commitment on their behalf. With that 25 leaders completed the study.



THE LEADERS INVOLVED IN THIS STUDY

The leaders who completed the study came from a range of industries, levels of leadership and geographies. Their ages, gender, years of tenure and titles are all illustrated to the right. A range of industries were represented including education, management consulting, marketing, finance and human resources. Titles included CEO, Vice President, Director, Manager, and General Manager. The aggregated Leadership Circle Profile 360 of all 25 leaders illustrates a group of leaders demonstrating highly creative and integral levels of leadership.



WHAT DATA WAS COLLECTED?

An app that was built for both Android and IOS systems which allowed them to fill in a custom built diary twice a day including the morning and evening and as often in between as they wanted to do so. The 25 leaders who participated generated almost 500-morning reflections and over 500-evening reflections. These reflections, the qualitative data from their pre-existing Leadership Circle Profiles 360 and post-study one on one interviews we conducted, generated in total almost 4,200 unique data sets. Technology enabled this to happen.

How Did We Define Habits?

A habit was defined as the frequency of leaders who engage in a specific practice more than 50% of the day sampled.

When we analyzed the Leadership Circle Profiles a distinct pattern emerged immediately. Almost 76% of all the leaders who were evaluated as having strength and strong people focus on being visionary and experience business experience and been inspirational. This was not of any real surprise but the overall intensity of the pattern was interesting. See Fig 4. for insights into how these strengths played across the various demographics of the participating leaders.

When we analyzed the question of where are the leadership challenges for these leaders a few patterns emerged immediately. Every single one of the 25 leaders had at least one evaluator suggest that they had no challenges or areas to develop. I.e. they were already operating at the optimal level of leadership.

Top leadership strengths from Leadership Circle Profiles

	Strong People Focus	Visionary	Context Experience	Inspirational	Approachable	Passionate	Empowers Team	Achieves Results
Small Organisation	1	2	3					
Medium Organisation	2			1	3			
Large Organisation	1						2	3
Hospitality	2	3		1				
Education	1					2		3
Other	1	3		2				
Australia	1		2	3				
Other Countries	1	3					2	
Current Position < 3 years	1		2			3		
3 - 6 years	1	2	3					
More than 6 years	3	1			2			
Total Tenure <8 years	1		2			3		
Total Tenure 8-15 years	1	2		3				
Total Tenure >15 years	3		1		2			

WHAT DATA WAS COLLECTED?

But when evaluators were asked to nominate some leadership development areas, four areas emerged. There was a question or concern that these leaders were becoming overloaded and were unable to get all of their work done. Other research suggests that the more effective leaders are the more work they get asked to do! When we interviewed the participating leaders they do not feel overwhelmed most of the time but did acknowledge their roles were full.

Three other areas emerge as being of importance or consideration including work/life balance, the ability to hold back and to take time in building their teams.

UNDERSTANDING THE MORNING REFLECTIONS

When we analyzed the morning reflections of the 25 participants over the 21 days that they wrote in their journals, a few clear patterns emerged. Almost half of the time was spent on, what we are calling, intentional daily planning. This turns out to be far bigger than just doing a to-do list. The journals reveal that these exceptional leaders spend time on a daily basis planning their immediate short and long-term workloads including those of that very day, that month and that year. In doing so they get really clear on a number of things including what are the outcomes needed for each meeting they are attending during that day, what are the decisions that need to be made during those matters and what was needed of them the leader in those meetings. They also got clear on how they needed to be, emotionally and presence wise, during those meetings.

Planning For Meetings

As an example, one leader spent some time every single morning getting clear on the variety of meetings she had to attend and what will be the optimal presence for her to exhibit during those meetings. In her interviews in journals, she explained that some meetings required her to be very focused while others required her to listen deeply or be empathic or to be creative. As a daily habit, she wrote a word on a post-it note per meeting so that as she was walking from one meeting to another she glanced at the pre-written post-it notes to remind her as to what was needed of her in that meeting.

Other leaders told us that they had learned over time to not accept an invitation to a meeting unless there was an agenda attached to it or pre-readings were accompanying the invitation so that they did not attend worthless meetings or waste their time. We learned that many leaders insisted their meetings were no longer than 50 minutes and finished to 10 minutes to the hour so that would allow them time to go from one meeting to the other. Not only was this an efficient use of time and focus, but more importantly it made sure for them that they were not carrying any residual negative emotions from one meeting into the next one because of the back to back stack of meetings throughout the day.

Managing Their Own States as a Leader

Leaders spoke about the need to be aware of their emotional and physical state and how that they made efforts to ensure that any potential negative emotions that they expressed during the day did not impact other people. In other words, the leaders intentionally planned on how to make sure that they, as a leader, were not getting in the way of the work that had to be done. The daily habit of planning and looking forward to the day ahead of them ensured that they were able to scenario plan for what might happen during the day.

Quite a few of the leaders told us in their journals and in the subsequent interviews that they spent time considering what might happen in particular meetings, especially high value or important meetings and they prepared for those scenarios. As an example, one leader talked about presenting to the Chairman of the Board and how she had to plan for any reaction he may have for his presentations. Therefore when it came to the actual meetings themselves, as events unfurled during those meetings she was well-prepared.

The Importance of Daily Exercise

We were impressed by the frequency of exercise as a health tool but also an emotional moderation technique. Every leader exercised on a regular basis and commented afterward as to how important this was to help them in their leadership role. One leader commented that when she took on the leadership role for the organization she felt that she had to be the fittest person in the organization in order to lead it through the change that lay ahead. She implemented a twice-daily exercise routine that included walking to and from work. The days that were stressful at work, her exercise regime increased. She was not unusual in this regard.

Daily Journaling

Whilst we had specifically asked these leaders to fill in a daily journal as part of the study most of these leaders had developed that habit over their lifetime. There was a distinct intention in how they showed up during the day and the planning process was a help with that. It allowed them to emit gratitude and positive emotions as they entered the workplace. It also allowed them to create mental alertness and agility and to help them in their perspective for the day.

But we were surprised at the similarity of how they used a morning journal to intentionally plan for the day. Key journaling questions emerged as being almost identical across this group on a daily basis with expressed answers and emotions illustrated as also being very similar. In other words, these leaders had through independent trial and process, were implementing a specific daily process using almost identical questions as a guide for their intentional planning.

Morning Journaling Questions from Exceptional Leaders:

- As the leader, what does my organization most need of me?
- What are the most important projects/ priorities I need to implement today, this month, this year?

UNDERSTANDING THE EVENING REFLECTIONS

We noticed quite a different set of habits emerged at night time compared to the morning reflections. The leaders seemed to develop a nighttime ritual of over-viewing all the work that had to be done, the work that was done during the day and the progress that had been made and its relationship to the amount that had yet to be completed. Whilst this is not unusual for anyone used to running projects, what was interesting was the consistency of the daily review of progress attained against the plan set that morning.

Detaching from the Daily Grind

They seemed to take a very active process of almost stepping above the work that had to be done and looking at it from a supervisory oversight perspective. This also allowed them to stay focused on the strategic areas that had to be completed. With that came a series of practices that allow them to stay calm, relaxed and enjoying the work. In a similar way to how athletes isolate their energy whilst not in training or on the field, these exceptional leaders seem to isolate their energy at night time through a range of practices. Sometimes this was done through exercise, reflection time, reading, watching favorite TV shows, spending time with families and friends or drinking red wine.

We asked those leaders what benefits they got from these practices. One was to make sure they were able to complete the work that had to be done tomorrow, therefore, they were aware of energy oscillation. Secondly, the internal reflections helped them to understand how they were enabling the work to be done. We noticed an enormous consistency in how often they reflected on their own leadership and how they could improve their leadership or more importantly get out of the way of events happening. This points very strongly to the most creative or integral levels of leadership.

What Were the Concerns?

No surprise, these leaders are human beings and their journals reflected some concerns they held as leaders. Not surprisingly 56% of the concerns that were noted were about all the work that had yet to be done and questions around the capacity to get it done. 32% of the time the concerns related to an important project or piece of work that was coming up such as a meeting with the board, a meeting with external investors or a crucial or serious conversation that had to hold with a member of staff. They also had issues such as personal life issues that presented 16% of the time that voiced concerns for them.

What Do They Do About It?

Interestingly when we asked these leaders in the interviews and looked at the journals the way these leaders manage challenges became very obvious. The number 1 thing these leaders did on a consistent basis was they did something! 24% of the time they took very intensive action through preparation to stay focused or addressing the issues head-on. These leaders never delayed in doing something. They appear to have a very clear focus on whenever an issue arises take immediate action in some way.

What was fascinating to observe was an equal and important focus on “who do I need to help, talk to, enable or support in order to address this issue”? They were very clear that sometimes issues that needed to be dealt with would not involve them directly but very much indirectly. Therefore their focus was around how are they able to influence other people to get this job done.

Lastly, we were interested to find out how often these leaders focused on themselves in the process of managing challenges. Almost 20% of the time they journaled and noted the importance of remaining calm during a potential crisis. It would appear that these leaders have a high awareness of what needs to be done, who needs to do it and how do they stay calm in that process so I can lead well.

What Were the Evening Practices?

- Actively engage in exercise especially if the day was stressful.
- Actively review the day from a progress perspective against the original plan.
- Take intensive action or plan to do so as soon as is possible.
- Disengage from work through family or friends related activities.

What Were the Evening Journaling Questions?

- What issue(s) need to be solved tomorrow?
- Who do I need to help, talk to, enable or support in order to address this issue?
- How do I manage me/ stay calm/ optimise myself?
- How do I not become a blocker in this situation?

What Happens When They Skip Their Practices?

Leaders shared they had less energy or lethargy on days that they didn't follow through with the daily habits or practices. Some leaders talked about feeling guilt or regret for not doing so. The impact overall was having less clarity, less direction, and less mental agility. One leader talked about not being centered or off balance and felt that her emotional reactivity increased on the days that she was less able to do her practices. Other leaders talked about experiencing cognitive overload or being more overwhelmed or stressed on the days that they had not followed through with their habits.

Quite interestingly what became clear was leaders talked about falling into previous less effective habits, i.e. being more reactive on the days that they didn't use the daily practices that had worked for them.

OUR CONCLUSIONS

We believe that exceptional leaders evolve over time through self-development, reflection and the daily application of specific leveragable practices. We were pleasantly surprised at the amount of journaling taken to ensure that they were not getting in the way as a leader, which in turns validates their high Creative scores and minimal Reactive scores in the collective Leadership Circle Profile 360.

What has emerged is a strong intentional leadership that permeates their whole life as a person, not just as a leader. But of course, the integration between their home and work lives is relatively seamless. Through the journals, we can safely say these leaders demonstrated an intentionality on a daily basis to focus on three distinct areas.

- They focus on what needs to be done in the organization;
- They focus on the people who are doing that and how they can support those people;
- They focus on themselves and how to make sure that they are enabling enough in optimizing the first two and are not getting in the way of either of the other two.

Whilst it sounds simple as a summary, the reality is the discipline to carry out a reflective practice every morning and evening is the key. This is not an ad hoc practice for these leaders. This is a daily practice that enables them to show up as a more intentional, planned, self-managed and focused leader. That is why they get exceptional results.

SUMMARY

Morning Journaling Questions

- As the leader, what does my organisation most need of me?
- What are the most important projects/ priorities I need to implement today, this month, this year?
- How do I ensure my time is best spent today?
- Who do I need to help/ work through to get the outcomes we need to achieve?
- How do I ensure I am not the blocker?

Planning For Meetings

- What is this meeting requiring of me as a leader (do I need to be here?)
- What decisions are expected from this meeting?

- Is the agenda prepared? If not then decline the meeting.
- Have meetings finish before the hour to allow for thinking time before the next meeting starts.

Evening Practises

- Actively engage in exercise especially if the day was stressful.
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- Take intensive action or plan to do so as soon as is possible.
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Evening Journaling Questions

- What issue(s) need to be solved tomorrow?
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