

Andy Crissinger:

Hello, everybody. Welcome to The Reboot Podcast. My name's Andy Crissinger. I'm the director of coaching here at Reboot, and we are here with another episode of Wisdom for Work. And today I'm excited to have my colleague Chrystal Bell joining me. Chrystal, great to have you.

Chrystal Bell:

Thanks, Andy. Hey, everyone.

Andy Crissinger:

And today we're going to be talking about micro practices for leaders. And we'll talk a little bit about what we mean by micro-practices and why they're important. But I wanted to start today setting the table with a quote. One of our favorite poets is the late John O'Donohue, who was a Celtic priest, poet, source of wisdom. And he has a piece called Blessing for a Leader that we read often at our boot camps. And there are a couple of lines from that poem that I wanted to share. He says, speaking directly to leaders, "May you work on yourself, building up and refining the ways of your mind. May those who work for you know you see and respect them. May you learn to cultivate the art of presence in order to engage with those who meet you."

And the reason I wanted to start with those lines is that I think it really frames up the work of leadership. Of course, when we hold power, when we're in positions of influence as a leader, we have the opportunity to really make the people who work with us, to make their lives more fulfilling, to bring out the best in them, we also have, if we're not careful, the power to do great harm. And which way we go with that starts with how are we cultivating ourselves, and what are we cultivating in ourselves to allow us to show up in ways that are additive to our teams.

This idea of learning to cultivate the art of presence in order to engage with those who meet you, that's the direction that we want to explore today in this topic on micro practices for leaders. So maybe let's start, Chrystal, if we could, talking about what do we mean by "practice?" Can you share a little bit about what we mean by that phrase "practice?"

Chrystal Bell:

Yeah. Thanks, Andy. I think of a practice as something that we engage in. I'll start that over. I think of a practice as something that we engage in that we care about. It's something that we do over and over again in order to achieve a certain outcome or perhaps even a state of being.

There are a couple of key elements when we think about practice. The first is that we want to bring intention, which is simply our stated desire to do something. We bring our attention to it, which means that we're fully engaged in whatever we're doing and giving our attention to that thing. And we bring repetition, so we do it over and over again until it becomes integrated into our life. Those are the key elements that define a practice.

But there's also something really important in the middle of that, which is doing a thing that matters to you. Our practices that don't involve things that we really care about can quickly become empty and stale, and they're probably not going to stick around. So if the goal is to use a practice to transform ourselves, then we really want to make sure that it matters to us what we're doing.

Andy Crissinger:

I love that definition, bringing intention and attention to what matters. And just to build on what you're saying, you can kind of see how some of us in our lives, when we've perhaps attempted to adopt a practice but it's not been connected to something that really matters to us or we haven't thought that through as much, it's easy to flame out and lose steam on those practices. "I should be meditating every day," but if I haven't really connected that to a value or something that's important, we might lose steam, or the practice might feel empty and pointless over time. So I love that definition.

Now, in our context, what we mean by micro, when we said micro practices for leaders, is just a practice that can be done in a very short period of time. It can be done ... Think about it in the seams of life and leadership. We recognize how busy our working lives are, especially for leaders. So what we're trying to offer up today are things that are bite-sized enough that they don't feel insurmountable to build into our lives.

Chrystal Bell:

Right. And I think that that can be one of the biggest barriers to practice, if you feel like you have to step outside of the space that you're in. If you have to go find a quiet space, if you have to go to a gym or go to a class, that makes it a lot less manageable. So the things that you can do right there in the moment might be really supportive for continuing and sticking with a practice.

Andy Crissinger:

Absolutely. Before we share some specific practices, I want to talk a little bit about how practices help us. And so let's talk for a minute about the importance of ritual, how ritual can support us in our lives. Practice, or in a sense, ritual, doing something repeatedly, as, Chrystal, you were saying earlier, over time it shifts our reactions and our responses under stress. An important thing to remember about practice is it's not just about the feeling you get or the experience you get while you're doing the thing. It can be, and that can often be quite pleasant, but it's really more about what does it yield over time as you commit to the practice.

So if you're, say, committing to a practice that helps you respond in a more centered way in times of stress, think about it as you're committing to the practice and it's like filling a cup with content, with liquid. When that cup gets bumped, whatever spills over is going to be what you've been filling it with. So if you've been filling it with these practices, then ideally, over time, that's what comes out when you're under stress or in an anxious state.

Chrystal Bell:

Oh, that's a great point, Andy. We become what we practice.

Andy Crissinger:

Right.

Chrystal Bell:

The more we do these things, the more available they are in our lives and the more they will spill over. That's a great point.

I'll talk about a second element of how practices help. And one of the things that I find with practices is that they help to center us. They help to keep us in a state that is grounded, resourced, stable. Moving us

away from places of being triggered, maybe reactive or anxious. And so some of the practices that I'll be talking about today are ones to bring us to our center.

As we think about who we are as leaders and what our jobs are and what we do and how we show up in the world, there are a lot of decisions that we make and there are a lot of relationships that we're in within our organizations, within our families, wherever. And as a leader, I want to make sure that I am making decisions and I am in a relationship with others from a centered place. That's when I'm at my best. How many times have you made a bad call or a bad decision when you realized, "I really wasn't at my best. I wasn't centered. Maybe I was in my amygdala, maybe I was really anxious about something." And so centering can be a really powerful way of bringing practices into our lives that keep us on balance.

Andy Crissinger:

Such a great point. And I love that idea of full bodied participation in what matters. So there's a somatic component to this as well, which is really important. That's actually a great segue into maybe our first practice. Chrystal, do you want to share Three Breaths, tell us about this micro-practice.

Chrystal Bell:

Yeah, I'd love to. The Three Breaths practice I think is one of the easiest pocket practices, micro-practices, that we can use, because you can do this in the middle of a meeting, you can do this at transition time. It doesn't require you to do anything other than pay attention to your breath and breathe.

I'll just walk you through the practice really quickly. And it is exactly as it sounds, it's taking three breaths. There's a little trick to the breaths. You want to breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, and you want to do it slowly. This is a time and an opportunity to take a pause. So it may sound like this. It was a breath in and a breath out. And if you repeat that and you do it again and again, a couple of things are going to happen.

First of all, you're going to get that pause. That pause is going to take you out of reactivity and into a place of response. It's going to help you cultivate a present-moment awareness. We breathe hundreds of thousands of times all day, but when you really bring intention to it and you pause and you think about what you're doing and the way that you're taking in your breaths, you can't help but be present in that moment. It's also going to engage your parasympathetic nervous system. That's going to be responsible for dropping your blood pressure a little bit, lowering your heart rate, getting you to a more calm state.

And from here you can operate from a place of choice. Taking those three breaths can be really powerful between meetings, at transition times, in times of stress, even in times of joy, just so we can sit up and soak in what's happening and really be there. So I love to use the Three Breaths all the time. I've done it so much it's now just fully integrated into my life. And I highly recommend this for anyone who's looking for a quick, easy micro practice as a way of centering. And if three breaths doesn't feel like it's enough, take four, take five, take 10. The thing that I can promise you about this is that there's no way that you can engage in this practice without changing your condition in some way.

Andy Crissinger:

Yeah. Such a good one. And we did Three Breaths before we started recording.

Chrystal Bell:

We sure did.

Andy Crissinger:

Yeah. And this is the sort of thing though that you can do in the midst of a meeting. No one else really even needs to know that you're doing it, it's just for you.

Chrystal Bell:

Right.

Andy Crissinger:

And it can have that same impact. Such a good one.

Well, let me talk a little bit about another micro practice. We're calling this a transition practice, and I actually learned this from an acupuncturist that I was seeing a while back. And she found out the work that I do as a coach, and she asked, "Well, do you have any practices for transitioning between clients?" And I was like, "Well, no. Tell me what you mean by that?" And she described to me her practice, as someone who is frequently coming into contact with people and the different energetic places that those people are, she said, "Every time I leave a treatment room with a patient, I walk over to this sink and I wash my hands. And it's a very intentional practice. I do it slowly. I think about giving back to that person what's theirs, coming back to myself. And then I move on to the next patient."

And I thought that was really a neat way of intentionally moving from one context to another, recognizing that I want to transition from my attention being over here, to now being over here, doing something that was for her. It had that same centering kind of impact. And so I started adopting this in my life, and I think this can be a great one for leaders. Now does it have to be washing your hands? No, not necessarily. You can use your own creativity and find something that works for you. But think about how often we context switch within the course of the day, meeting to meeting, Zoom to Zoom. What are we doing in between those times, to rather than just being on that treadmill and thoughtlessly moving from one thing to the next, how do we create a little bit of transitional space to move from one thing to the next?

I'll say it as well, the red/yellow/green check-in that we've talked a lot about at Reboot, we've done some podcasts about that. If you've come to any of our events, we start everything with a red/yellow/green check-in. That's another form of a transition practice, helping you get centered and grounded and be present for the thing that you're about to be a part of. A meeting, a session with your team, that sort of a thing. So transition practices, using your creativity and figuring out what works for me, moving from context to context throughout the course of the day,§ can be really fun.

Chrystal Bell:

Oh, that's great.

Andy Crissinger:

Why don't we transition to another somatic micro practice? Do you want to talk about centering in three dimensions, Chrystal?

Chrystal Bell:

Yeah. This is another practice that can actually be paired with Three Breaths if you like, but it essentially involves centering in three dimensions of length, width, and depth.

For this one I actually like to stand up. Some of these practices that we're talking about are really nice if you can actually pair it with a body movement. So if you are able, this one involves taking those breaths, except with each breath, what you want to do is you want to center first in your length. Maybe that's just lengthening your spine, feeling your feet rooted to the ground, and feeling that sense of dignity with that first breath. The second is the plane of width. And so standing with your feet apart, maybe raising your arms to the sides with your palms up and thinking about taking up space. This is the plane of belonging.

And finally, with that third breath, you think about your sense of depth. This is what is behind you and what is in front of you. This is the plane of fundamental sufficiency. When you think about all of the internal and external messages you might be getting throughout a day or throughout the course of life, and the messages where you may feel like, "Ugh, I'm not worthy. I really blew that. I don't feel like I'm part of this thing." All of those messages that get internalized, this centering in three dimensions can really be the answer to that.

I think of length as really sinking into and rising up into my dignity. As width, in terms of belonging and seeing myself as a part of the thread of this world and this community and my organization. And then that final plane, depth. Thinking of all that is behind me, all of the wisdom, all of the experience, all of what's gotten me to the place that I am now, and all that is represented by my front body, what is ahead of me. And that can be where creativity, imagination, innovation live, and all of the things that the future represents. So really using my body and my breath to lean into those three dimensions can be a wonderful centering practice, especially in the midst of the messages that tell us that we're not feeling so great or that we are less than.

Andy Crissinger:

Yeah, yeah. That's so good. I was thinking as you were sharing that practice about the times when we may have to show up and deliver some message. Maybe it's a presentation, maybe it's to potential investors, maybe it's to a board, maybe it's to our team [inaudible 00:25:52] hands, something like that. That could be a great practice for those moments where we're maybe especially susceptible to those internal tapes that say, "You're not good enough to do this. You don't know what you're doing. What are you doing here?" Those kinds of things.

Chrystal Bell:

Absolutely.

Andy Crissinger:

Yeah. Great antidote to those messages. Well, let's share one more, and this is the idea of setting an intention before an interaction. What do we mean by that? This is something that we can do before heading into a meeting. It could be a one-on-one. It could be, like we said before, maybe I'm giving a presentation, maybe I'm about to have a hard conversation with a team member. But before I head into that and actually start that conversation or that meeting or that presentation, it's naming allowed to myself, "What is my intention for how I want to show up here?"

It can be about outcomes, "What's the ideal outcome I'd like to see? But it's not just that. It's more about, "And how do I want to show up?" It's really focused on what I have agency to impact. So I may not be able to fully ensure the outcome that I want, but what I do have control over is, "How do I show

up here?" It's as simple as taking a beat before I head into that one-on-one and saying something like, "I'm intending to show up here to this hard conversation with integrity, with honesty. And I want to speak all the things I have to say without holding back, but I want to do it with care and kindness." That's just an example of how I might set that intention before I head into, say, a really difficult feedback conversation with a team member.

You can do this with a partner, if that's appropriate. Often we'll do this when we're facilitating with groups, co-facilitating. Reboot colleagues will sit for a moment before the group arrives and we'll say, "Okay, what are our intentions for how we want to be with this group today?" And we'll share that with one another. But you can also just do it by yourself. If you can speak that intention aloud, if you're in a space where you can do that, that's also really powerful. There's something quite potent about speaking it aloud. But you can also just write it down at the top of your notepad, or if you're taking notes for the meeting, you can just write it out for yourself. But some way of setting that intention really can have an impact on how you show up. And you can return to it if you find yourself getting a little off-kilter in the midst of that experience.

Chrystal Bell:

Oh, that's an excellent point, Andy. Just listening to the practices that we've talked about today, there's a common thread running through all of them, which is that all of them involve us coming back to a centered place. And recognizing what's available when we are centered, as opposed to triggered, off the cuff, reactive, can be really powerful in us reclaiming that agency over how we want to show up in our work, in our lives.

Andy Crissinger:

Absolutely. Well, as we bring this episode to a close, I wonder if there are a few more important things we'd want to encourage folks to keep in mind as they start adopting and playing with their own practices.

Chrystal Bell:

Yeah. Well, in terms of practices, as we spoke to earlier, you want to make your practice relevant. It really needs to be something that you care about that you can lean into. And those practices, as you start to engage in them, they may be uncomfortable at first. Maybe it feels like you're not getting a whole lot of traction, but I can promise you that you are turning up the dial on coming to that place of an awareness and an opening to bring about the desired change that you'd like to see.

I'd also recommend that you do these practices often. It takes repetition. There's lots of research out there that says if you do something once or twice it's not going to stick. If you do it hundreds of times your body starts to get that awareness. But it's once you start doing it thousands of times that you're really creating those new neural pathways that make it integrated into your life.

And lastly, I would say, practice during low-stakes times. I think you spoke to this a little bit earlier, but I just want to underscore it and say it again. The more we do this during those normal times in our lives, when everything is maybe running on all cylinders, the easier it will be to do when we are actually under duress.

Andy Crissinger:

Yeah.

Chrystal Bell:

We cannot expect to practice something and have it work if we only ever do it at the times when we are under our greatest duress.

Andy Crissinger:

Right.

Chrystal Bell:

So the more we do it, the more available it becomes in our lives.

Andy Crissinger:

Yeah. We become what we practice, is what you said earlier.

Chrystal Bell:

Absolutely.

Andy Crissinger:

Yeah. And then maybe we can also just remind folks that the reason we frame this as micro-practices, is we really want to make the point that these are things that can be embedded into the seams of daily life. They don't have to feel incredibly overwhelming. You don't need to set aside hours and hours of time for these. There may be some practices for which you do want to do that, but the ones we're sharing today can really be built in to the course of a really busy life and really busy days. Again, if we set the intention, if we bring our attention to what matters, we can build these into our lives to great effect.

Well, thanks, Chrystal. It's great to be here with you today.

Chrystal Bell:

Oh, same to you, Andy. Really good to be here with you.

Andy Crissinger:

All right. Thanks, everyone.