Google Culture and the Threefold Way
[Part One]

An effective system of deliberate practice sets out the mechanisms of deliberate practice as the lowest-energy state of the system. The environmental and systemic conditions across multivalent scales must be designed in such a way that mastery is an intrinsic outcome of participation in the system. To use a familiar metaphor: the system of mastery, designed well, is an incline, and participants simply roll down it.

This is an ideal. We've already seen that fostering mastery is as much the province of interpersonal and intrapersonal qualities as it is environmental or systemic qualities. However, it's my suspicion that there are certain aspects of the environment and systems that may be designed to encourage such interactions.

Rather than being abstract, broad and nebulous about these qualities, and to test my hypothesis, I propose examining an existing organizational model to discover how concrete systemic elements can satisfy qualities of deliberate practice, either explicitly or implicitly.

Last year, a Google employee wrote an exhaustive blog post about Google work culture from his perspective as a coder / software engineer. From his niche within the company, his post compared work strategies, on both the strategic and tactical level, at Google with other organizational strategies and cultures he's experienced. By dissecting this description, we can observe where qualities of the Google work culture align and diverge from the ideal qualities of a system of deliberate practice.

So, to accomplish this proposed comparative analysis, I'll first the review qualities of a system of deliberate practice. Then, using the Google employee's description, I'll evaluate or contrast his self-report with those qualities. For a simpler analysis, I've broken down his description into the several "scales" of deliberate practice systems: Organizational (big picture), Component Systems (function clusters), Team/Group dynamics (leadership and teamwork), Interpersonal interactions, and finally the Intrapersonal level (individual psychology).

The eventual purpose of this project is to land the theories and principles of the Threefold Way theory of mastery, play, and personal empowerment (which is a rephrasing of the now awkward and polluted Work/Play label) into teachable, measurable solutions and principles for real-world implementation. This evaluation exercise is a bridge from principles to practice; a case study that hopes to identify best practices for integrating the Threefold Way into organizational design and management strategy.

Review: The Threefold Way
Predisposition (Neurogenetic Determinism)
Practice (System of Deliberate Practice, satisfying all qualities of fostering mastery),
Passion (Personal empowerment, motivation)

Review: Qualities of Deliberate Practice
Goal-Oriented
Feedback
Mentor
Quality of Play
Technique over Outcome

Google drives behavior through incentives.
You can choose to work on a far-fetched research-y kind of project that may never be practical to anyone, but the work will have to be a reward unto itself. If it turns out you were right… and your little project turns out to be tremendously impactful, then you'll be rewarded for it. Guaranteed.

Google's management strategy is more dangling carrot than yoke and whip, so to speak. They understand the human value in channeling people's energy towards choosing for themselves the rewards they most desire. If your project is important to Google, you're offered incentive to participate in it. If your project is of low importance to Google but of high personal importance (a "passion project,") then it is understood that the satisfaction or indulgence of that passion serves as reward unto itself. Steve qualifies his description by implying that if a "passion project" proves fruitful to Google as an organization, additional rewards are possible beyond the project's implicit value to the individual.

The psychological principle at work in this reinforcement model – cum – management strategy cannot be underestimated. Dr. G has said that children learn from reinforcement and reward much more than through punishment. She maintains that the only thing children learn from threat-based instruction is to be afraid. In Behaviorist learning, fear is an inferior motivator to reward. So an organization that does not *drive* behavior by fear of punishment (so to speak) but instead *pulls* individual behavior through incentives and rewards, thereby creates a system of moderate freedom within specific parameters, in which individual behavior is moderated through choices and priorities. This is a humanistic model whose efficacy, in theory, is fully supported by known psychological principles.

The salary-bonus model of reinforcement is a crude system of reward, and those organizations that understand the multivalent possibilities for reward (esteem rewards, experience rewards, as well as capital goods rewards) understand that people are motivated by far more than money. People are nuanced beings, and completing a task to receive a paycheck is akin to hitting the Behaviorists' feed bar. Any organization can benefit from seeking out and learning the complex motivations of its employees, and designing a system of reward that responds to those motivations.

It would be useful to examine reward systems (Chapters, for example, has a "dream book" point-based reward system for its employees) and ask, which systems work and what systems fail? How is a good reward system designed? Customer loyalty and data-tracking rewards systems like Air Miles would also fit within the scope of this proposed

investigation. The aim of such a study would be to discover the psychology and human value in rewards systems as well any tangible results experienced by organizations that have implemented such systems. Formulating a "best practices" deliverable and accompanying teachable for organizations would be an important step in developing the discipline of the Threefold Way.

However, the entire discussion around rewards systems emphasizes results over process, and disregards the story behind the achievement. How can an organization incentivize attention to process? How can a company make visible the story behind the achievement, and even reward a "good" process over a "bad" one, even if both processes achieve similar results in terms of value? Who does this and what could we learn from it?

…every quarter, without fail, they have a long all-hands in which they show every single project that launched to everyone, and put up the names and faces of the teams (always small) who launched each one, and everyone applauds.

The "all-hands" gathering described here (no small ceremony for an organization of Google's size) is about recognition and celebration: externally, the company announces "we, Google, did this." But internally, the announcement is different: "Joe, Sam and Andrea did this, this what they look like and where their offices are." Google, in this exercise, is celebrating outcomes, true, but also humanizing them, connecting the results to the individuals, which is one way of telling the story. The process is not emphasized, but the achievement is at least humanized.

Another way to reward process and foster organizational learning (it could help knowledge management too) would be if all participants in a project were responsible for documenting their process, and at the project's conclusion, performed a group self-review that covers the challenges they faced, the beneficial solutions and innovations they came up with to address those challenges, and how those solutions came about. I imagine this is a fairly common ritual, and done well, it can be a positive and valuable moment of reflection, but done poorly it can be a bureaucratic chore.

If a process document, more akin to a storybook, was a required deliverable in tandem with the final product, it would add a layer of narrative to the result, a "creation story" that anchors the result in a context, fostering greater appreciation of the product overall and enriching the "process capital" of the organization.

On the individual level, creating a process document would aid peer-review and encourage reflection on process. It would, in theory, cause the individuals involved in the accomplishment to record and commemorate not only the results of the project, but also to formalize and communicate the challenges they faced, the process and strategies they used to overcome those challenges, and the human dynamics (relationships) involved in the eventual accomplishment. A process document (which can just as easily be a "making of" video, slideshow, or any other medium) is a crystallization of both process capital and

human capital. It is important to note that instead of the typically arid self-review (or in tandem with it), employing a narrative format *implicitly* imbues the exercise with soul.

To Be Continued…