Choice

Articulating your approach to leadership

by Maj Lindsay E. Mathwick

It is often mentioned that Gen James N. Mattis, USMC(Ret), keeps a copy of Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* (a common stoic philosophy reference) with him everywhere he goes. But for the most part, it remains one of those books that the rest of us often quote but rarely read. Maybe we think we understand the broad tenets of stoicism, but we would be able to apply them better if we gave them a deeper look.

My introduction to stoic philosophy came through *The Daily Stoic* by Holiday and Hanselman. Over the course of 2019, I included the readings in my morning routine. As with many new habits, I did not notice a shift at first. But, as I strung together a chain of these morning readings, I found myself better able to articulate certain leadership approaches to myself and others. I was better able to explain the "why" behind what I did.

The pursuit of effective leadership is a lifelong task, but within the stoic philosophy lies a framework which offers a measure of order and increased positive outcome. While my own yearlong study hardly makes me an authority, it has provided me with insights into my own execution of leadership and avenues of improvement. This has prompted me to continue these studies and perhaps better understand why *Meditations* is such a respected reference for leaders.

From this vantage point, I offer this short article as a prompt for others to examine the basic tenets of stoic philosophy and determine if and how it resonates with their particular style of leadership.

It is probably worth starting out with the over-arching point of stoicism. While it is not one of the main focus points below, I see it as the umbrella that hangs over all of them: this is the ability to recognize what is, or is not, in your control. This is the crucial first step in executing what is under your control, and that is your response. You choose how to view things—be they people, experiences, or challenges—and then you decide your response. You choose. With that umbrella in mind, these next three sections describe how I *choose* to look at people, experiences, and challenges both as a Marine and as a person.

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People: Everyone Is Doing Their Best

In leadership we often say that people are the most important thing. I choose to come from a place where I believe everyone is doing their best; that is my baseline. If the outcome you produce is not up to my expectations, I will first assume that I did not provide the right guidance or give you the right tools or training to complete the task. But I will always start by assuming you did your best.

I recognize that it is not always going to be the reality. But what a better, healthier place from which to start rather than automatically assuming someone messed up on purpose and then jumping down their throat in anger. We have all been in a situation where we made a mistake despite our best intentions and efforts. How forgiving were we of ourselves in such situations? Is there any reason not to pass that same tolerance on to others, at least initially? (See *Meditations* 10.30 for Marcus Aurelius' version.)

When something goes differently than I would expect, I try to assess the situation by first asking at least two questions, thereby seeking to better understand what the person's thought process was or how they interpreted the task. This illuminates their view of the scenario in my own eyes, providing a different lens through which to see more clearly.

Looking back over my fifteen years in the Marine Corps, the opportunities to implement this "two question method" occurred most often when I taught at The Basic School; I did not always implement it well. It seemed like my students frequently did things

> ***"When people injure you, ask yourself what good or harm they thought would come of it. If you understand that, you'll feel sympathy rather than outrage or anger. Your sense of good and evil may be the same as theirs, or near it, in which case you have to excuse them. Or your sense of good and evil may differ from theirs. In which case they're misguided and deserve your compassion. Is that so hard?"*** [1]
>
> ***—Marcus Aurelius,* Meditations**

that initially seemed way off the mark. Sometimes I launched into them without trying to understand their reasoning or thought process; I usually regretted those reactions when I reflected back on them.

Eventually, I started to more regularly implement my "two question method," although I did not realize how it might relate to stoic philosophy until this past year. When my first reaction was to yell or correct, I instead asked two questions or stepped back and observed for a bit longer before injecting myself into the situation. That usually led to additional questions and a better understanding of the student's thought process. Then it led to a worthwhile conversation between adults where both parties almost always walked away learning something.

There is certainly a point as leaders where we have to lay punishment and responsibility on those who do wrong. I cannot shoulder the whole blame for my Marine who goes out and chooses to do drugs, street race down the highway, or assault another person. But that does not mean that we cannot, at least initially, act with patience and kindness when less black and white situations present themselves and fall short of our initial expectations. As Seneca writes, "Wherever there is a human being, we have an opportunity for kindness."[2] One of the things that helps me when I struggle with this point is to reset my perspective: Is what you are about to get upset about really that big of a deal?

Experiences: Have Perspective in the Present Moment

I see perspective through two lenses: framing (your interpretation of an event) and context (your ability to compare the current situation to a larger one). We often think about perspective as looking back in history at events and learning from or understanding them. My goal is to have that perspective as the experience occurs, rather than having to wait a week or years before the "a-ha" moment.

Framing. Perhaps the most familiar instance of this might be Chesty Puller's quote from Korea: "We're surrounded, that simplifies things."[4] This is not to say that "everything happens for a reason." Puller found his regiment surrounded by enemy forces for a slew of other reasons too lengthy to discuss here, but he *chose* to reframe the situation and find something positive.

> ***"Don't hope that events will turn out the way you want, welcome events in whichever way they happen; this is the path to peace."[3]***
>
> ***—Epictetus,***
> **Enchiridion**

This "reframing" does not diminish the significance or importance of an event, but it allows you to choose a more positive response. Imagine being the one to deliver the news to the regimental commander that the unit was surrounded and outnumbered. What type of a reply would you hope to receive? A professional, measured response seasoned with some positivity, or an impulsive, angry reaction? The better question might be, if you were the regimental commander, which reply would you look back on with pride?

Context. Your ability to place an event in a larger context affects perspective as well. A majority of people in this world have had bad things happen to them directly or to people they care about. Parents lose children, natural disasters inflict massive damage and casualties, and before painful diseases take hold of loved ones. These are some of the toughest experiences that come to my mind. So, when unfortunate experiences happen in my daily life or at work, I place them in the context of these others, and it makes the scenarios staring me in the face seem absolutely manageable.

Again, I have no intention of diminishing the importance of the event itself. My focus is on the response that I choose, and I am better able to choose a response that is in line with my values and that I can look back on with pride if I keep some perspective in mind.

That is not to say that I am 100 percent successful in this point. I have instances as a Marine and as a human being where my replies are more impulsive reaction than measured response. I welcome those shortfalls; they are where my learning occurs. This ties to my final point: how I choose to look at challenges.

Challenges: There Is No Growth in the Comfort Zone

When I look back on my time in the Marine Corps, the periods I enjoy reminiscing about the most are the tough ones. When I showed up at The Basic School as a young captain, I was not a good instructor. I struggled to re-learn all the material and confidently and coherently convey it to students in a way that made any sense.

The first couple months were not pretty. I had to step far out of my comfort zone and grind through extra hours of preparation to bring myself to the level of instructor expected at our introductory school. By the time I left, I was an entirely different instructor, Marine, and person than when I first arrived. It can be tempting to only remember the last portion of that tour when things were clicking, and I felt confident in my abilities. Because of that, I remind myself that I became a

> ***"The true man is revealed in difficult times. So when trouble comes, think of yourself as a wrestler whom God, like a trainer, has paired with a tough young buck. For what purpose? To turn you into Olympic-class material."[5]***
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> ***—Epictetus,***
> **Discourses**

very good instructor not in spite of the challenges I had but because of them.

It can be very hard to see that in the moment. I look back on that time, now almost eight years ago, and the lessons are clear; I am grateful for those challenges. But in the moment, it was hard to embrace and welcome those uncomfortable months.

Instead of that initial reaction where we might be perturbed by an obstacle, the stoics encourage us to choose those uncomfortable situations; that is where the learning occurs. Seneca even recommended setting

> aside a certain number of days, during which you shall be content with the scantiest and cheapest fare … it is while fortune is kind that it should fortify itself against her violence.[6]

Translated into a modern adage: get comfortable being uncomfortable. When you face challenges and shortfalls, do not become dejected. See them as an opportunity to reflect, learn, and grow.

Your Choices

When you choose to believe that everyone is doing their best, your approach to others is one of understanding and less of judgment. When you choose to shift your view of circumstances, the result is a calmer, more reasoned response. Both lead to a more positive and healthy environment, whether that be on the sports field, the workplace, or with the family. When we still fall short in some of these situations, we must continue to choose to embrace the challenges we face, reflect on them, and learn from them for future development.

Even though stoicism is not a complete leadership guide that applies to all situations, it is a useful addition to one's repertoire of leadership tools, regardless of your style. Even in instances where stoicism is not a dominant tool, it still can strengthen the foundation of one's leadership style. Choose wisely.

Notes

1. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, translated by Gregory Hays, (New York, NY: Modern Library, 2002).

2. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *On the Happy Life*, translated by Aubrey Stewart, (Los Angeles, CA: Enhanced Media, 2016).

3. Epictetus, *Enchiridion*, translated by Robert Dobbin, (London, UK: Penguin Group, 2008).

4. Martin Russ, *Breakout,* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1999).

5. Epictetus, *The Discourses*, translated by Robert Dobbin, (London, UK: Penguin Group, 2008).

6. Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic Volume I*, translated by Richard Mott Gummere, (Los Angeles, CA: Enhanced Media, 2016).