Understanding And Using System Energy: Practitioner Competency Development

Rianna Moore and Rick Huntley

In this article, we are interested in exploring questions such as: What is the nature of system energy, and what does it mean to use or work with it? What are the competencies involved in working with system energy, and how does one go about developing them? Where would *Use of Self* be located in a competency framework organized around using system energy? Finally, how is the learning and development that results from experiencing oneself as a member of a flat-structured, egalitarian group unique?

THE NATURE OF SYSTEM ENERGY

System energy is a physical - not metaphysical - phenomenon. While "real" in the physical sense, it is generally not visible to the unassisted human eye although Kirlian photography is one technology that does purport to capture the electromagnetic field, or aura, of living organisms, thus rendering the "system energy" generated by a human being visible.

Our concept of *system* is one that seems to be commonly understood among many OD practitioners. Our orientation as social change practitioners is to *human* or *social* systems (or *human social* systems) that can exist at various levels, from micro (interpersonal) to meso (group or inter-group) to macro (institutional or societal) levels (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 1998). Both the natural sciences and the social sciences are sources for the system paradigm.

The system paradigm is rooted in holism (the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts) and the quantum notion of non-locality (the idea that, as all things are interrelated and interdependent, an impact in one area of the system affects the whole system). Both notions are illustrated in Bell's Theorem (Wheatley, 1992; Zukav, 2001), or more popularly in the hundredth monkey phenomenon (Keyes, Jr., 1986).

The "quantum world" is the name for the subatomic realm of particle physics, the "invisible universe underlying, embedded in, and forming the fabric of everything around us" (Zukav, p. 20). Its essence is energy that manifests in the relatedness between and among parts, or patterns. In a system, there are "no parts [per se]. What we call a part is merely a pattern in an inseparable world of relationships" (Capra, 1996, p. 37). This concept from quantum physics is expressed in the celebrated speech commonly attributed to Chief Seattle:[1]

> This we know,
> All things are connected
> like the blood
> which unites one family….
>
> Whatever befalls the earth,
> befalls the sons and daughters of the earth.
> Man did not weave the web of life;
> he is merely a strand in it.
> Whatever he does to the web,
> he does to himself.

The system paradigm also embraces principles from other disciplines: nonlinear dynamics from engineering; and field theory, self-organizing theory, and the concept of emergence from biology and social science (Olson & Eoyang, 2001, p. 8).

Social theorists understand a field as an unseen force that structures space (Wheatley, 2001, p. 42) and shapes behavior. Emile Durkheim (1951/1979), for example, viewed society as a "psychic unity" (or field) with its own set of energetic currents that impel its inhabitants "with a definite force" to behave in certain ways (p. 306). To answer sociology's question of what holds society together, Durkheim formulated the concept of the "collective conscience" (pp. 131-132), a type of field. A contemporary of Durkheim's characterized society even more radically as a being with its own life, consciousness, interests, and destiny (Schaffle in Giddens, 1971, p. 67).

Finally, natural and social scientists from Fritjof Capra to Margaret Wheatley to Gary Zukav have pointed out the importance of human relatedness to the formation and sustenance of what Capra - and Chief Seattle - called the web of life. The "physics of our universe is revealing the primacy of relationships" (Wheatley, 2001, p. 12). Indeed, the "configuration of relationships [is what] gives a system its essential characteristics" (Capra, 1996, p. 158).

We think of *system energy*, then, as a physical albeit invisible being with a life of its own. When people connect relationally, energy is activated and a system forms. Relational connection exists at every level of system, from dyadic to group and inter-group levels to the organizational level, and so on. The question is: "How are we to know that system energy is present, when we cannot see it?"

System energy is the felt sense that manifests in any human social system, when and wherever the proverbial two-or-more are gathered. It is the wave or vibration felt when one walks into a space where others are already present. Before you even make eye contact with another person, you have a sense of the energy in the room, and whether it is a place you want to be. You have a sense of whether the energy is aligned well enough with the energy of your own bodymind for your well-being to be supported. It may feel like home, or it may feel different enough to offer opportunities for learning and personal growth. Or, it may feel so unaligned or even mal-aligned, as it were, that it feels unsafe, and you may decide to walk back out before connecting with anyone.

System energy feels different from one system to another, and from one moment to the next in a given system. It can feel intense or flat, benevolent or toxic. Anyone who works with groups or organizations can recall moments of great intensity in certain encounters. Such moments come and go because of the dynamism inherent in a living system. It is the spirit that is present when a meeting is alive with purpose and commitment; but when that spirit departs, it is over (Bunker & Alban, 1997). In this sense, then, virtually everyone has referential experience when

it comes to sensing and intuitively understanding system energy.

A COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTITIONERS

Once we have a sense of what system energy is, the question for the practitioner is: "What does it mean to use or partner with it, and how does one develop greater effectiveness at working with system energy?" To develop such competency we must first step out of our own subjectivity in relation to system energy and, in effect, create an object relationship with it, as its own entity, being, or presence. In other words, we must stop being in the energy and instead differentiate *from* it so as to have a relationship *with* it, on behalf of the client. This is the essence of the *marginality* of the consulting role.

We have found it useful to think in terms of a competency model[2] that integrates the domains of Knowledge, Skills, and Use of Self (see Figure 1).
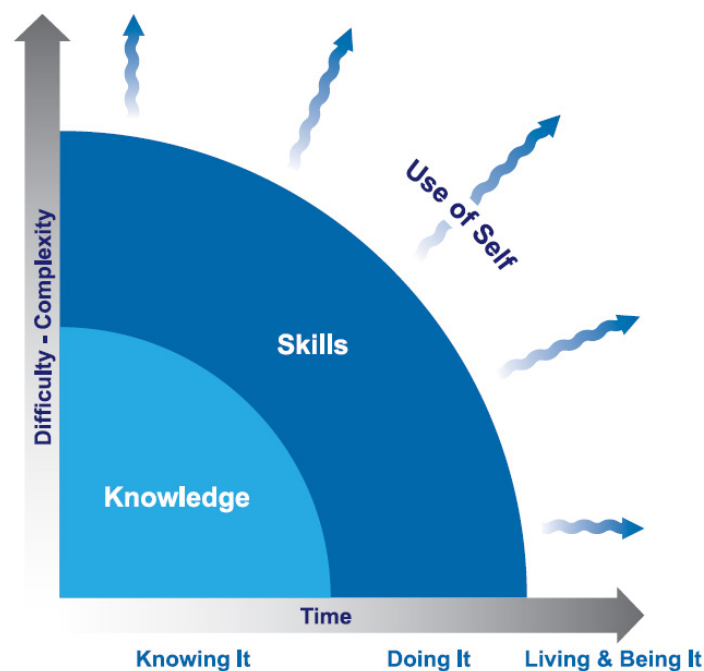

Figure 1: Competency Model for Understanding and Working with System Energy - Rianna Moore, 2011

The vertical axis in this framework defines the dimension of *difficulty-complexity*, which increases with movement up the axis. In other words, knowledge acquisition is less difficult-complex than skill development, while developing the Self and increasing the ability to "use" the Self effectively is *more* difficult-complex than either of the first two domains.

The horizontal axis defines the dimension of *time*. Each successive domain requires more development time than the previous one. In other words, acquiring the knowledge base relevant to a given competency takes less time than developing the relevant skills, while practitioner self-

development and increasing one's ability to *use* the Self effectively would seem to be an ongoing, lifelong project. One can, for example, always become more effective at using oneself to undo oppression in the movement toward emancipation, the vision compelling social justice work.

The bottom line in the model (Knowing It … Doing It … Living & Being It) is another way of imagining the domains of Knowledge, Skills, and Use of Self. The "it," of course, is understanding and using or working with system energy. At this point, we would like to describe what we have found useful in the process of developing competency around understanding, and working with, system energy, in terms of this competency framework.

Knowledge: Knowing It

There are several knowledge bases that we have found useful for understanding or coming to know system energy. We have pursued certain conceptual frameworks in common and have also learned others separately from each other. The predominant framework that we hold in common is power equity group (PEG) theory.

Our knowledge developed experientially from years as members of various learning groups organized around PEG theory and practice, as well as from reading the primary text (Pierce, 1988/2011). In addition, staffing workshops forced us to learn the theory well enough to share it with others. Knowledge of PEG theory develops primarily through the experience of membership, so it is difficult to separate out "knowledge" or "knowing" from "skills" or "doing" as in the competency model above.

Learning as a member of a flat-structured, nonhierarchical group is a unique developmental experience, qualitatively different from any other learning experience in which role authority is present in the form of a teacher, trainer, or facilitator. A power equity group is a flat-structured group *informed* by PEG theory in which power is distributed equally among members because no hierarchy exists. Structural flatness "loosens" system energy from the hold of role authority, thus enabling it to work directly with each member of the system or group (Pierce, 2011).

Here we are talking about system energy working with us instead of us using system energy, as promised by the title of the article. Indeed, we are saying that *our ability to work with system energy developed from the experience of having system energy work with each of us, over time.* Learning from this direct, unmediated engagement with system energy resulted in the development of certain competencies (Knowledge + Skills + Use of Self) for working with or utilizing system energy as practitioners.

One might ask why that is, or what that means. What "work" could system energy possibly *have* or *want* to do with its human members, or "agents" (Olson & Eoyang, 2001)? What is the phenomenon being reached for here?

Our experience suggests that the system energy present in such a group has an agenda, which is – simply stated – to move members along on their own unique developmental journeys. It nudges us toward our own learning edge, then holds and works with us there, over and over and over. It seems to know what our developmental needs are in the here-and-now, however they are organized. One's particular needs of a moment may be organized around healing and recovery, or self-awareness in terms of one's impact on others, or undoing cultural dominance, or addressing skill deficits, or self-actualization. The system energy activated in a flat-structured learning group in which culture has been consciously and consensually built appears to want its members to heal-grow-develop-become.

At this juncture, we do not want to be too specific about the nature of the work of the groups in which we have participated. In a very real sense, it is not for us to disclose. We simply want to acknowledge that we have had our most powerful learning and personal growth and professional development experiences in the presence of system energy. As Rick said recently, "I can't deepen my learning without you because I don't know what I don't know, and only you can tell me." The *you* in his claim includes other members of the system, or group, as well as the group-as-entity or system energy as a being unto itself. Of course such learning and development takes place in groups and systems other than power equity groups, per se. The key is the looseness of the energy, and the energy is looser in flat, or flat*ter*, less hierarchical structures.

Other conceptual frameworks that have contributed to our understanding of system energy are referenced briefly in the first section of this article. We have also developed knowledge of system energy from participation in numerous NTL programs, programs offered by the Gestalt OSD Center, and the doctoral program in human and organization systems at the Fielding Graduate University.

Skills: Doing It

Acquiring the relevant knowledge for understanding and using system energy is necessary but not sufficient for practitioner competency development. One also needs skills for *intervening* effectively. For example, knowledge about complexity in social systems acquired from reading about systems theory is not likely to position one to intervene effectively when turbulence erupts during a work session with a client. Like getting to Carnegie Hall[3], developing intervention skills takes practice-practice-practice!

From our own practice as consultants in various types of systems with varying degrees of hierarchy and complexity, we have identified a number of intervention skills that build on the types of frameworks described above in the Knowledge domain of the competency model. The overall conceptual framing of oneself as practitioner in relation to system energy is the knowledge that:

1. System energy exists, apart from oneself as a practitioner and apart from system members;
2. The practitioner can form a relationship with it so as to use it and work with it on behalf of the client's needs and goals; and
3. The practitioner can intervene as an agent of the system, to move its agenda forward.

We offer a sample of interventions here to illustrate some of the skills involved:

- *Sensing or reading system energy and its emotional state*. This can take the form of seeing an image of it in the mind's eye or hearing its message in the mind's ear, if you will. It can also manifest somatically as a sensation in the body. Sensations and images such as these can inform the consultant of what is going on at various levels of system. The consultant can then use such information to think through what sort of intervention, if any, might be useful to address the client's needs and purpose.

- *Paying attention to behavioral phenomena from members, understanding that system energy is working with each member in some way.* In more traditional methodology, an outburst from an individual is likely to be interpreted as something about that person, while, through the system lens, one might assume that something is happening in the larger system that is being expressed through an individual's emotions. An intervention might be offered at the group level instead of responding to the individual who appears, perhaps, to be over-emoting in the current context by, for example, asking a generalized question such as, "What is happening in the group as a whole?" Or, "What is going on in the system and how is it affecting individual members?" Note that this focus on the whole instead of the parts is typical of a Tavistock training intervention. The primary difference is the conceptual framing of social system energy as a being or entity unto itself with its own life, will, and purpose.

- *Asking a question such as: "What is buried in the group's history, and how is it affecting what is happening in the here-and-now?"* This question gives particular focus to a reflection on past events in the group or organization that may be hindering forward movement in the current context. Members are then free to respond (or not) to the touch of the group as embodied in the consultant and the intervention.

- *Asking members to be self-reflexive at all levels of system, from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal, group/sub-group/inter-group and whole system levels.* This intervention generates diagnostic information that members can then use to align, critically, activity with purpose.

- *Acting out the action of the group or system energy so that members might visualize it and come to have their own object relationship with it.* The consultant, in effect, role plays the system energy entity. The consultant may also invite members to act it out as if they were the system as a whole, to see what differentinformation about the system might emerge.

One aspect that these interventions have in common is that they invite reflection. We have learned the power and importance of reflection-in-practice because it is during reflection that individual and organizational learning emerges into system consciousness. The potential range and variety of interventions is virtually infinite, constrained only by practitioner competency, the limits set by the design for the project, or by the container for the system.

Use of Self: Living and Being It

Competence at working with, and using, energy on behalf of a client system also incorporates the *Use of Self* domain. 'Use of Self' literally refers to how one uses one's Self in service of a client's vision and goals for change, at whatever level of system, whether coaching an individual, facilitating an interpersonal or inter-group conflict toward resolution, or leading a large system change project.

An axiom of OD practice is that one is committed to the ongoing project of developing the personal-and-organizational or professional Self so as to evermore effectively practise social and system change work. This claim begs the question: "What is 'the Self'?"

The notion of Self has preoccupied philosophers since ancient times, psychologists since Freud, and sociologists since Mead. The Self has been variously painted as a *compelling sense of one's unique existence or personal identity; the inner agent or force* that controls and directs functioning over motives, fear, and other emotions; the *inner witness* to events, serving an introspective function; or the synthesis of an organized whole having a continuity of life experience over time, or *personality* (Reber, 1985, pp. 675-676). It includes character attributes, social group identities, and "elements such as our needs, intentions, styles, patterns, habits and defenses" (Seashore, Shawver, Thompson, & Mattare, 2004, p. 44).

The personal-and-organizational Self exists in social contexts that inform and shape the Self, and one's *sense* of Self. From the social constructionist perspective, the Self changes or is socially constructed in response to events in context, with others. Indeed, in the process of working with system energy to effect social change, we are both changer and changed: "As we use our Self to create change in the world around us, we may also be intentionally and unintentionally changing ourselves" (Seashore et al., 2004).

However the individual practitioner thinks of 'Self', the key to the 'Use of Self' domain in the competency framework here may be seen as an ongoing, lifelong project toward developing one's efficacy at working with system energy by continuously:

- Building self-knowledge relative to the various dimensions of Self, as above;
- Deepening awareness of one's impact on other individuals as well as on the whole system in various
- social contexts;
- Enhancing one's effectiveness in terms of conscious

and unconscious uses of Self in the practice of social change.

The Seashore model for the intentional Use of Self identifies five attributes and skills for effective Use of Self as a useful guide for the self-development project:

- *Agency*: the ability and capacity to act as one's own agent in carrying out and implementing courses of action.
- *Giving and Receiving Feedback*: continual redirection of efforts based on a constantly changing environment of people, process, and situations.
- *Reframing*: allowing for new perspectives and ways of organizing information and perceptions; cultural competency.
- *Self-efficacy*: belief in one's capacity to achieve desired ends successfully.
- *Skills*: communication, listening, goal-setting, conflict management, team building, building and maintaining effective relationships, stress management.
- *Support Systems:* the pool of resources (individuals, groups, organizations) which an individual can draw on selectively, to help one be at their best in moving in directions of their choice, and to grow stronger in the process (Seashore et al, 2004).

Notice that the Seashore model integrates various pieces from the Knowledge, Skills, and Use of Self domains in the competency model presented here. For insight on our own development toward more effective Use of Self, we refer the reader to the previous section on the Knowledge domain.

APPLICATIONS

We apply our knowledge of system energy and how to work with it in every client engagement, at whatever level of system, from individual coaching to interventions with dyads, groups, inter-group work, or with large systems. For this section, we have selected three projects in different types of organizations in which competencies built from fluency in PEG theory enabled us to intervene in ways that enabled the client to move forward in the face of various challenges. In other words, our ability to see and use, or work with, system energy that had been loosened because hierarchy had been removed or flattened supported the client's movement toward its vision and change goals.

A Large Midwestern Utility

The top leaders of this large utility company had decided to flatten the corporate hierarchy by taking out several supervisory levels, establishing larger aggregates, and creating self-managed teams to manage virtually all aspects of the work. This reorganization of the structure extended to the support functions as well. The leader in charge of the internal change initiative understood from prior knowledge of PEG theory that looser system energy from flattening or removing hierarchy would result in

heightened awareness and increased expression of the diversity in the organization (Pierce, 1988/2011).

The consultants and the internal change project team designed an intervention that focused first on skill development around diversity and inclusion, then on how to put these skills to use in a flatter structure with looser system energy afoot. Individual and organizational learning took place initially in workshop formats; then follow-up coaching and consulting was provided to the leadership team as the implementation of the structural changes continued. The company has been able to maintain its commitment to a streamlined, less hierarchical structure built around individuals' and teams' ability to self-manage in the face of heightened diversity and loose system energy.

An Internal OD Group

This group of about ten internal OD practitioners supported a large division in a very large government organization. The cofounders decided right at the beginning to create a flat, non-hierarchical, self-managed structure for the group, and were able to convince the division commander to accept and work with this structure despite the thoroughly hierarchical, command-and-control structure of the larger system that the OD group was set up to support.

This decision about structure was intuitive for the cofounders who were, by nature and by training as OD consultants, inclined toward participation and inclusion in all aspects of the operation. They had maintained their commitment to flatness for about 15 years despite challenges from the larger system for them to align with the hierarchy, when they stumbled across a reference to PEG theory as a conceptual framework for understanding structural flatness, and the group and organizational dynamics phenomena resulting from flatness. They contracted for a learning experience organized around PEG theory in which the entire group and their associates participated. By framing conceptually the dynamics unique to flat structures they were able to maintain their commitment to flatness and to discover tools that explained their intuitive understanding of why flatness would be useful for an OD group.

Leadership emerges in a flat-structured group, which is not leaderless but leader-full, in a very real sense. The cofounders were acknowledged as the emergent, informal leaders of this internal OD group. When they departed from the group after a 15-year tenure, the demands from the external environment for new leadership to emerge from within the group to take their place overwhelmed the capacity of the individual members who were left; and, after a painful period of about two years, the external command structure put formal role authority in place to stabilize the group. At this juncture in the group's history, PEG theory was useful in reframing this event as the group acting in its own best interests by creating role authority to stabilize itself in a moment of crisis. This

helped those members who had been internalizing the events as an indication of failure on their part.

A Proprietary, In-House Electrical Engineering Group

The mid-level manager of this group of about 80 chip designers was deeply involved in the larger organization's diversity-inclusion change initiative. His sense of ethics and morality was engaged by the values of diversity, inclusion, equity, and social justice which he had been exposed to in various learning experiences. At the same time, he was learning about the efficacy of self-managed teams - if, that is, they could avoid imploding from the stresses inherent to flat structure without a conceptual framework and skill set designed to enable team members to work with each other in constructive ways. He, himself, was motivated more by a need to achieve than by the need for control, and was comfortable achieving results through others. All of these aspects of his personal learning and leadership style were conducive to him moving toward a flattening of his organization, forming self-managed teams, setting high standards for achievement, and using PEG theory as a framework for everyone in the organization to learn about how to self-manage in the presence of loosened system energy. The consultant he employed designed interventions to teach PEG theory and followed this up with individual and team coaching as the structural changes were implemented. Over time, this team became the highest producer in the larger, 400-person organization.

PRACTICE MATTERS

We believe that developing competence at using, or working with, loosened system energy is important for two basic reasons. Firstly, the democratic practices of inclusion and participation are inherent to the founding values of OD and social change work, and these practices, by definition, loosen system energy from the grip of hierarchy and role authority. Thus, it is incumbent upon practitioners to understand the concept of loosened system energy and to develop skills consciously for working with it.

Secondly, as a practical matter, more organizations are moving to flatter structures without understanding the phenomena that occur in social dynamics when virtually all structural controls are removed. Therefore, there is a need for more intelligence and insight into the nature of these phenomena and how to deal with them organizationally, and in terms of the self-management skills required from individual members of the system.

RELATIONSHIP MATTERS

To conclude, we would like to acknowledge the importance of relationship to the development of practitioner competence for using system energy effectively. All human growth and development occurs in connection, while relationships that foster growth are

created through the processes of "mutual empathy and mutual empowerment" (Jordan & Hartling, 2002, p. 1). The equitable dyad, as interpersonal-level system, can support the relational partners in becoming the best persons and best practitioners they are capable of becoming, if the relational entity itself is nurtured, respected, and protected.

Our partnership and friendship has developed over time as we have engaged in various learning experiences in the presence of system energy. System energy, itself, has illuminated possibilities for mutual empathy and mutual empowerment across the many social identity differences that might otherwise have separated us. We have both been sustained by it in our respective personal-professional developmental journeys and it has contributed to the impact of our work in client systems. We are pleased to have had this opportunity to share some of the benefits of our own learning from system energy with a wider circle of colleagues.

BIOGRAPHIES

Rianna Moore, PhD

Rianna Moore is a human-and-organization development consultant and coach with 35 plus years of experience working primarily in corporate and government sectors. Specialties include diversity-inclusion-social justice; group and system dynamics; relational and communication skills; learning event design and facilitation; process consultation and coaching/development for internal HR/OD and diversity-inclusion specialists.

Rianna holds the PhD in Human & Organization Systems from the Fielding Graduate University. The title of her dissertation is Close Friendship Between Black Women and White Women in the US: Fostering Connection in a Culture of Disconnection (2011). She is co-author of several books in development or in press on topics concerning organization development and diversity-inclusion-social justice issues. Rianna also holds two masters degrees: one in organization development from Fielding and the other in arts and letters from the State University of New York.

Rianna has been a member of The NTL Institute for Applied Behavioral Science since 1998 and is a member of the Diversity, Inclusion and Social Justice and the Research Communities of Practice, as well as a member of the Research Community of Practice Steering Committee.

Rick Huntley

Rick Huntley is a seasoned executive leadership consultant and coach, he successfully transforms managers to leaders in executive roles through learning processes for achieving organizational results. Rick advances and grows skills for building team and organizational cultures for leadership to emerge. Rick works with his clients to identify key leadership behaviors inherent to the executive that motivate peak performance, positively influencing engagement, innovation, and other key operating metrics.

Rick completed graduate study at Howard University in Washington, DC and earned a post-graduate certificate in Organization and Systems Development from the Gestalt Center for Organization and Systems Development in Cleveland.

A member of the Board of Directors of NTL Institute of Applied Behavioral Science, he chairs the Governance Committee and Member Engagement. Other involvement includes the instructional team of the highly regarded School of Public Affairs, Master's of Science in Organization Development at American University.

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NOTES

1. Seattle, or Si'ahl, was born around 1780 on or near Blake Island, WA, into the Suquamish Tribe. He came to be known as a great leader and warrior. The city of Seattle is named after him. Controversy persists about the speech attributed to him, questioning both the attribution and content.

2. This competency framework is based on one that I (Rianna) learned years ago from Chuck Phillips, who I believe learned it from another senior OD practitioner, possibly Herb Shepard. In the model's original form, the Use of Self domain was called 'Attributes'. As the concept of Use of Self has emerged and been developed in OD theory and practice, and literature around it has developed, I have come to see attributes as an integral aspect of the Self but too limiting as a name for the domain, and so I have adapted the model to reflect this insight. I also added complexity to the difficulty dimension/vertical axis. The bottom line, Knowing It – Doing It – Living & Being It, arose from the system energy of the Rianna-Rick working relationship, creative partnership, and friendship.

3. Carnegie Hall in New York City is named after Andrew Carnegie, a Scottish-American industrialist and philanthropist who built great wealth during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. A popular and apocryphal story among American would-be entertainers is that of a young man who asks a person how to get to Carnegie Hall. The answer: "Practice, practice, practice!"

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