Podcast: A Skill We All Need – Improving

George Wright, management consultant, explores why focusing on continuous improvement is a critical leadership purpose; improvement for your self and creating the needed support for your staff's growth. He identifies the benefits of improvement as increased self-confidence, greater job satisfaction and more opportunities for growth. Improvement is not a one-time event, it's an ongoing process. Making improvement a top priority will be the best investment you can make.

Read George's article, "The One Skill You Need for Success: Improving" here.
Visit George's website here.

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT
[00:00:00.490] – Steve [Intro]
Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As

instructional coaches and school leaders, you have a challenge to guide continuous teacher growth that promotes student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from our experienced guests and insights that I've gathered across many years. I'm thrilled you're here. Thanks for listening.

[00:00:30.700] – Steve
A skill we all need: improving. Joining the podcast today is George Wright, the founder and President of Wright One Consulting. George is a management consultant who specializes in psychological assessment analysis, organizational assessment, as well as leadership development and training. He helps clients with selection and development, performance coaching and issues of organizational change. I dropped George an invitation to the podcast when I read a post of his titled, "The One Skill You Need for Success: Improving." Those of you who are frequent listeners or following my blogs, know the thought that there is no mountaintop to teaching has long been a focus of mine. So you can see why his title jumped out at me. Now there's a special reason that I follow George on LinkedIn – I met him at the very start of my teaching career. You see, George was a student in my 5th and 6th grade combined class, so he got to spend two years with me as his teacher. Welcome, George. It's just great to have you here.

[00:01:49.640] – George
Thanks, Steve.

[00:01:50.470] – George
I appreciate that introduction.

[00:01:51.840] – George
And yes, to your listeners, Steve was a phenomenal teacher. I can tell you, I was a poor student and Steve got the best out of me, best of what he could do, because you always have to work with the material you got.

[00:02:04.190] – George
But Steve, it was great for me to have you as a teacher and you were also my basketball coach. I remember that. It was a good time.

[00:02:12.290] – George
So thanks for having this. We're coming full circle here because it's always great to work with people from your past so thank you for having me on. I really appreciate this.

[00:02:21.450] – Steve
It's a delight.

[00:02:22.700] – George
So I'm wondering if you'd just talk a little bit about your background that led to you working in managing and leadership consulting.

[00:02:31.100] – George
Sure. I went to school at UMass Amherst and when I got out I had a Psych degree and I knew that I wanted to do something a little different, so I thought about going into clinical counseling psych, and I got accepted to a program, a small school down in Radford, Virginia and I took a master's in applied industrial organizational psychology. And so for those of you who don't know what that is, that is the application of psychological principles and concepts to the work environment. Organizational design. Very heavy on selection and development, use of assessments to evaluate and vet candidates. When I came out, I worked at a very small boutique firm for about 20 years doing that work and then opened my own company in 2007, Wright One consulting. And so we focus on those primary areas of selection and development. We also do a lot of training and development. We do coaching. And so our focus is really on there, but fundamentally, what we're trying to do is use scientific principles of psychology, the human species, and how do you get the maximum effort and focus out of people when you do this?

[00:03:35.890] – George
So that's sort of the brief overview of how I got here.

[00:03:39.500] – Steve
Amazing, just amazing. You wrote in the post and I'll make sure we put the link so that people who are listening in can go back and read your post, but you talked about some of the reasons, I called it the "why's" of focusing on continuous improvement. Start us out with that.

[00:04:01.070] – George
Yeah. Even broader speaking, why do you want to work on yourself? And fundamentally, I mean, you mentioned this idea there's no mountaintop to teaching, there's no mountaintop for any of us. There's no finality. And so I always remind people at any level is, look, you need to get better consistently. One, if you do that, you're probably going to engage your motivation. I'm always worried about, are we losing our motivation? Even now, we're later in life, Steve I think we can do that. Even now, it's like, what don't I know? What do I have to get better at? So part of it is motivation, and we all know that emotional intelligence, so this concept of how do I relate to other people and how do I relate to myself is critically important. So if you really want to get better at those concepts and develop those capabilities, you really need to step back and say, what do I need to do to be better?

[00:04:52.460] – George
How do I need to be more effective? And really that self reflection leads to I need to never stop doing this process.

[00:05:00.230] – George
And so, that big, "why," really, for me, is about those two things engaging your motivation long term, and then if you can enhance your effectiveness, you can be better with other people.

[00:05:09.220] – Steve

I use a descriptor that if I'm talking about teaching or I'm talking about leadership, I was training new school administrators earlier in the week, if you take everything you know about teaching or everything you know about leading, and you put it inside of a balloon, the outside of the balloon represents your areas for further study. So, in effect, every time you learn something new and push it into the balloon, it opened up this new area. So it's part of my description that one of the reasons I'm not retiring is I still have too much to learn. A few weeks back, I wrote a blog on ChatGPT in schools, and I thought, had I retired six months ago, I wouldn't even know what ChatGPT is.

[00:06:03.130] – George
That's a whole separate issue there – using AI in any dynamic way. In business, it's now used quite heavily. Customer service companies use it. You have chat bots, you have AI responses. So that's a whole deal in and of itself, and that technology sits there. It's got benefits, but it has some significant downsides we need to be careful about. But for me, here's the thing about the difference, maybe and I could bifurcate between education and business a little bit. Educators have always struck me as people who want to be better all the time. Along the way, I mean, I taught at Bloomfield College here in New Jersey for ten years. I was a professor and I was in the evening department, and so I had students all the time. And if you do that, you better be in front of your craft. You better get in the literature, you got to really stay on top of what's going on because those kids are going to push you.

[00:06:56.110] – George
So I always found educators are willing to do this. My problem sometimes is, when I work with leaders in business, some of them have the idea of, well, I've got this position, I really don't need to push myself.

[00:07:06.440] – George

And that frustrates me a little bit, but I always got to push back and remind them, hey, look, if you want your people to be better, you better set the example, and you got to invest in you. Even CEOs, when I work with them, it's like, what are you doing to be better? Some of them look at me like, what are you talking about? Yeah, I'm a personal fan of personal development plans. My clients, when I coach them, you got to fill that thing out, and you better do it every six months. And even if you're a COO, I want to see that. What are you working on? How do you need to be better? Tell me what you're going to do for the next six months to make you better. And that helps people do that, and they engage that process. They do get better.

[00:07:46.330] – Steve
It's funny. There's a line I stole from Tom Peters a whole lot of years back that I constantly put in front of school people, and his suggestion was that we should do away with evaluations, performance evaluations, and replace them with resume updating. So every six months, you sit down with your supervisor and you update your resume. And if six months have gone by and you don't have something to add, we have a problem. So either we, as a company, aren't offering you the opportunities to do that new learning, or as an employee, you're not taking advantage of them.

[00:08:26.000] – George
Yeah, and we need to do that. I'm not sure that some of my clients in the business world would appreciate helping update their resume. We just came through the great resignation. I'm not sure they want to do that.

[00:08:37.280] – Steve
Well, trust me, schools are at the same place right now.

[00:08:41.440] – Steve
But the idea being, and when Peters wrote it, he wrote it at the time where companies were changing so much that he said

the only guarantee you can make to your employees, if you're a quality company, the only guarantee you can make to your employees is when they leave, they'll have a better resume than when they came. So that's the place you'd want to be working. You mentioned coaching. Let's jump into that a little bit, because you talk about the value of seeking feedback. And a lot of my work is in the area of not only being a coach, but I do a lot of the training of coaches. So talk a little bit about the connection between seeking feedback and the continuous improvement piece.

[00:09:34.360] – George
Feedback is a funny thing. We're surrounded by it. And I always tell this little funny joke when I drive around New Jersey, I get a lot of feedback. Most of it's nonverbal, and usually it has to do with me, not them. We are surrounded by feedback, but unfortunately, there's a whole bunch of elements of feedback. One, you need to get more of it. You're probably not getting enough. If you want to be better, you have to open up yourself to the fact that you probably aren't getting enough feedback. My CEO clients are the most challenged. People don't want to give your senior executive – there's a power struggle there. There's a whole bunch of things that go on. But I would say, look, you got to go out and get that. You need to do that. But anyone, and you need multiple sources. We most commonly get it from our supervisors or managers. I invite people, look, get it from your associate, get it from your colleagues.

[00:10:25.880] – George
They're probably better sources than anybody. The reason you want that is you want to be better so you need to understand what other people are seeing in you.

[00:10:33.650] – George
And I always encourage people just actively do that. I just got back from a leadership class this morning. One of their assignments was for today, they had to seek out feedback from

at least three members of their team. And what did they hear and learn? And we were reflecting on that, a lot of people were surprised to learn that people see them differently. And the reason they were surprised is they don't do it often. So feedback, you need to do it. The other element of feedback is giving it and most people don't know how to give it so people pay attention to it. People are really giving feedback and it falls flat. Those people who give me feedback when I'm driving, it's ineffective. It works, it gets my attention, but it's really ineffective. So I always say to people, look, you got to seek it out, get it, but also learn how to give it. Learn how to give it with a sense of I'm in this to help you get better.

[00:11:27.880] – George
And so there's that two way street about it. But I firmly believe you need feedback and you should welcome it. Yes, some of it, even when delivered, ineffectively, hurts.

[00:11:38.240] – George
I get that. But nonetheless, is there an element of truth in it? We often get probably some of the best feedback from the people closest to us. And so when I get feedback, if my wife gives me feedback you know what? Sometimes it may be like – I'm going to be defensive here, but you know what? The reality is she's probably right. And my best bet is I better listen and I better pay attention and I better take that seriously because she knows me better than anybody else does.

[00:12:07.020] – Steve
She also wants you to be successful.

[00:12:10.400] – George
Yes. She's always got my best interest in mind. If there's one person in my corner, I know it's my wife.

[00:12:16.830] – Steve
That's the message we need to get clear on in our

organizations.

[00:12:23.010] – George
Absolutely. And if you seek it out, remember, people want you to be better. Especially when you're a leader. And every educator, you're a leader by default. You're leading. I don't care that you don't have leader in your title, that's meaningless to me. You're leading and you're setting an example and you better pay attention to that. So you need feedback. And it's welcome at all levels. Just go out and get it. It will be the thing that gets you better.

[00:12:48.390] – Steve
It's interesting because when I work with schools on selecting teacher leaders for positions, one of the things that I describe is you're looking for a person who's willing to be vulnerable before trust has been built. So I don't need the best science teacher be head of the department. I need the person who's pretty comfortable taking a lab that they did with kids that didn't deliver and be able to lay it down in front of three members of the department and say what thoughts or ideas have folks got as to what I could have done differently here. That's the person that's going to set that environment where the other people begin to open themselves up to feedback.

[00:13:35.180] – George
Yeah. And you probably found this – when leaders start to open up and be vulnerable and say, hey, I want your feedback, it gets easier for them to give feedback. It fundamentally says, hey, I want your feedback, be open with me. And people then say, hey, if you're going to do that with me, I'm going to be more accepting of what you have to say. But if we start to cycle, it gets so much easier. Those people who are resistant to it, I always say, then put on your blinders and go for a drive because that's what's going to happen to you with no feedback.

[00:14:06.410] – Steve
Another area that you talked about that I wanted to check in on was goal setting and experimenting.

[00:14:16.190] – George
Wow. Yeah, goal setting. No goals, no motivation. Very simple. When I've coached people in the past, clients will come to me and say, hey, we have somebody in the team who's not motivated. First question, tell me about your goals. What are they going to tell me most often? I really don't have any. Goals in that connection, they're pretty dynamic and you're probably familiar with smart goals, you've probably heard that term before. That element in there about being realistic, about what your goals are in there, is that understanding of motivation. When your goals are realistic, it kicks in. If there's a challenge, but also the opportunity, maybe you won't get it. You're going to rise to the occasion and go back to David McClellan's work way back in the 50s. He found that pretty significantly. So we know that goals are critically important. So helping people set those in a structured way. So, an example as a coach, my goal setting practice is about every six months.

[00:15:12.630] – George
I like six month goals. Let people work, do some work. Where are you? You get good feedback, you move, you reset, and you go again. The experimenting part is a little different.

[00:15:23.350] – George
And I started doing this during COVID. COVID was a fun time to run experiments because you could do certain things. You could do certain things and see how it went. We're in our homes, okay, let's try not sleeping for a couple of days and see what the effect is. Not great, by the way. So look, I believe that people should run experiments. I encourage my clients. If you want to try something, how about you set a goal of a two weeks? Try something for two weeks. It gives you long enough time to say, hey, what's that like? What did I learn? Does

that work for me? Then I can build a habit out of that. And so it is about saying, hey, let me try something just for two weeks and see what happens. If I like it, great. I mean, one area that I like to focus on right now is well being is an important part of what we have to do now as leaders.

[00:16:10.050] – George
We got to pay attention to well being of everybody, including our own. Mindfulness practice is something that people feel uncomfortable doing. Try a mindfulness practice just for two weeks.

[00:16:20.490] – George
Just two weeks. See what works for you. If it doesn't hate two weeks, you don't have to worry about it. But I think when you start setting goals and you include those experiments of that two week setting, you're going to find that you can do some things differently, and you're doing it long enough so it's meaningful, but you're not over investing in it, so you can move on and learn.

[00:16:40.180] – Steve
So in the work that I've been doing with goal setting, I've got people tying a hypothesis in with it. So when you're saying try something for two weeks, that that's their hypothesis. So I have this thought that this behavior could move things in the direction I want to go. And so if it's a hypothesis, means I've got permission to find out it wasn't the right one and I can go back to the drawing board and try another.

[00:17:14.360] – George
That's why experiments are great, because you're not losing anything. You're really not. In anything you're going to learn, we talk about the concept of failure. I don't believe in failure. I don't think anybody really fails. I think you learn and you move on because we're all going to do this. The great secret that no one wants to talk about is everybody

fails. Everybody struggles with something. And this concept that everybody has done something and it's not worked out. Question is, did you learn? What are you going to do? And then how do you move on from there? So experimenting is really and I do like the idea of a hypothesis, what might happen if hey, here's this association I think is there. Yeah, okay, my performance might go down if I don't sleep for two days. Okay, let's test that out. By the way, don't do it. It's terrible. Do not do that. But you can do all kinds of experiments like that, and you can run them that way.

[00:18:08.170] – George
Hey, what would happen if? And figure that out. I like to do that. I don't think we do that enough anymore. We just don't.

[00:18:15.720] – Steve
There was an area where you wrote about the connection between self confidence and greater job satisfaction as outcomes of continuous improvement and you kind of touched on this a little bit. There's quite a few school leaders today that are identifying teachers having dissatisfaction, which seems to be increased post-COVID. And I'm wondering in your work, is that broader spread around employees and organizations as well? And is this idea of an improvement model being one of the things we should be responding to?

[00:19:01.940] – George
Yeah. In the corporate world, all you got to do is go over to Gallup and you start looking engagement numbers. And for those of you not familiar with that, the Gallup Organization, I believe they're still located here in New Jersey, they do these worldwide engagement surveys. Engagement fundamentally is defined as are your associates, the employees in your company, everyone, willing to go above and beyond what is expected? Are they willing to do that voluntarily? And that is called engagement. Then there's non-engagement people who are not doing that, and then there's something called disengage. Those are individuals actively working against your

organization in some way. And if you look at that data year over year, what are we finding is that although there was sort of a little bit of an uptick, which was interesting during COVID. Those engagement numbers keep going down, and it's a big deal in corporate America. It's worrisome. For me, I think it is about leadership. We know from those studies, from Gallup, that your leader matters to you.

[00:19:59.490] – George
And here's the funny thing, and CEOs hate when I say this, but it's not really the CEO that matters. It's your direct leader. Who is the individual that you have the direct relationship with.

[00:20:09.240] – George
And so that is that individual who says to you, hey, look, I want you to be more effective. How can I help you be better? That's the way I would suggest organizations in general go about it. Train your leaders. Your leaders, those middle level and I don't like that word manager, but train those middle level people. That's where it starts. How do you get those leaders to engage? We always say one of the themes of any leadership program, be the leader that everyone wants to work for. That means I care about you as a human being. I'm interested in your development. I have a personal interest in you being more effective. That means I'm going to really concern myself with how are you being more effective at what you do? That means, yeah, I want you to do a personal development plan. I want you to think seriously about what you need to be more effective. I think that's the way we begin to have part of this solution to what is disengaging or having lower engagement scores.

[00:21:06.910] – George
But look, I think educators it's a little bit more dynamic. I'm here in the States, and so I read this article in the Wall Street Journal, "Why Teachers Are Leaving," and it broke my heart to read that teachers are being assaulted in the

classroom by students.

[00:21:22.830] – George
That was really disconcerting to me. My heart goes out to those teachers who have to live in and work in those environments where kids are doing that. I think there's a problem there. I think that's more dynamic. I mean, most of my clients don't work in an environment like that. They go into a work environment. There's a collegiality, if you will, where you don't expect to get assaulted by your coworkers or your social. That just doesn't happen. I think education has gotten harder, for sure. I think it's hard. So I think part of it is yeah, having leadership and broader discussion is where's parental responsibility come in. There's a whole separate issue there with educators. But I think for me, yes, if you are working on yourself, you will probably feel more self assured. How you feel about you will get better. If you see yourself improving in some way, you will probably feel a sense of, hey, I'm feeling better about me.

[00:22:20.760] – George
That's going to lead to more satisfaction. That's going to have some distinct outcomes. And I think if leaders really put that emphasis on that, things get a lot better.

[00:22:30.910] – Steve
What's going through my head now is the leader has to be focused on his or her continuous growth. And part of their continuous growth is focused on how they generate that continuous growth and support that continuous growth of the people that they're leading.

[00:22:52.780] – George
Absolutely. Yeah, they're connected. You have to be invested in yourself, but you've got to be really invested in your team. How are they more effective? You'll get better when they get better, but you really need to double down and set that example of, hey, I'm working on my way and here's how I'm

doing it. And that's where we close that feedback loop and it comes right back to that. So for me, that leadership element has to be there. But again, my heart goes out to educators at this point. This must be so hard. It must be just tough.

[00:23:22.420] – Steve
Well, George, I really appreciate the time and thinking that you've done here. And I have to tell you that my introduction to teaching when you were with me as a student, trust me, I was on a big learning curve at that time and I can only share that I find it really exciting all these years later to be back and engaged in a conversation with you that with you playing a different role here than you did there. You've pushed me to continue my focus on my continuous growth.

[00:24:04.640] – George
Well, thank you. And again, you were you were phenomenal with me. You know, I always look back at that and you know there are certain teachers you remember and that's the other thing about being an educator, remember you impact. And you may think people forget you. They don't. I remember you very well. There were other teachers there. Hampton Township Elementary School, that was you and some of those other folks. I remember those people. They had an impact on us and so it is always that great thing. I'm glad we got to close this loop. I'm glad we got to do that because I appreciate everything you did for me and I was not an easy kid. So I apologize. But it turned out pretty well.

[00:24:43.900] – Steve
No need. I had my heart in it when I worked with you. I still had a whole lot to learn, but I had my heart in it. I'll put the link to your post in the lead-in to the podcast. I'm wondering, is there a way that people could get in touch with you, see some of the other things you've written, and maybe ask some questions?

[00:25:04.570] – George

Absolutely. One of the best ways is to do that is connect with me on LinkedIn. Just drop me a line, hey, I heard you on Steve's podcast. We do have a newsletter that you can subscribe to. You don't have to follow me or be connected to me. It's called the Wright Note. So if you want to follow that, you can come along, and I'm more than happy to share those ideas. And if you go to our website, if you were really interested in talking to me, we have a connection there, you could just book time on my calendar, 15 minutes. We can have a conversation. I always welcome those kind of conversations. So please, if you want to do that or even reach out to me directly on the website, we answer everything that comes in. So more than happy to talk to folks.

[00:25:43.270] – Steve
Tell folks how to find your website.

[00:25:45.680] – George
It's www.wrightoneconsulting.com.

[00:25:57.640] – Steve
Alright, we'll put that in the lead-in again for those folks who are listening to the podcast while they're doing their morning walk.

[00:26:05.010] – George
Okay.

[00:26:05.500] – Steve
Alright, have a great rest of your day, and thanks again so much, George.

[00:26:10.380] – George
Alright. Thanks so much. Take care.

[00:26:14.000] – Steve [Outro]
Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn @stevebarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and

blogs at barkleypd.com.