What can business leaders learn from ancient Greek philosophers?

To help achieve "the good life" companies can learn from the techniques used by Greek philosophers. Jules Evans explores seven that could help employees live their lives better

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Aristotle teaching a young Alexander the Great. Photograph: Unknown/ Bettmann/CORBIS

I've met and interviewed hundreds of people who have used ancient Greek and Roman philosophies to help them live their lives better, including soldiers, astronauts, politicians and business leaders. They all used philosophy to help them achieve "eudaimonia", by which the Greeks meant "flourishing" or "the good life". Here are seven techniques, from seven philosophers, which businesses can use to become more eudaimonic.

**Socrates: dare to disagree**

Socrates, one of the first philosophers, insisted on our right to think for ourselves. Too often, he warned, humans sleepwalk through life, simply going along with the crowd.

This is dangerous in questions of morality, and particularly in corporate governance. When corruption is uncovered, too often people say "everyone else was doing it". But our characters are our responsibility. Socrates was prepared to die rather than go against his conscience. Does your organisation encourage independent thinkers, and people who follow their conscience? Does it allow people to give critical feedback to managers? Does it create opportunities for good people to blow the whistle on bad behaviour?

**Aristotle: let people seek fulfillment**

Aristotle was a great biologist as well as a great philosopher. He based his ethics on a psychological theory of human nature, insisting that we are naturally virtuous, rational, social and happiness-seeking. Governments and organisations need to build the best systems to let humans fulfill their natural drives.

Aristotle's philosophy was an influence on Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's [Self-Determination Theory](http://www.selfdeterminationtheory.org/), which suggests that employees will work harder for you, and perform better, if you give them tasks they find meaningful and morally worthwhile.

Humans want to believe in something and to serve it. Appeal to your employees' best nature and they will answer that call.

Your employees will also be more motivated if you give them the opportunity to feed their natural curiosity through learning opportunities. That could be vocational training, but it could also simply be learning about the world, ideas, culture. Does your company have an evening or lunch-time lecture series, such as Google Talks? Could it give credits for evening adult learning classes, as companies such as Cadbury and Ford once did?

**Plutarch: be a good role model**

Plutarch, the ancient Greek historian and educator, understood that humans are incredibly social creatures, who constantly observe the people around them and imitate them.

Unfortunately, people often grow up surrounded by bad role models. However, we can steer people, by providing them with better patterns to imitate. That's what Plutarch tried to do with his famous work, Parallel Lives, which offered biographical sketches of some of the great Greek and Roman heroes – Cicero, Caesar, Alexander the Great, Pericles – to give young people something to emulate.

In organisational terms, that means what you say to your employees is less important than what you do. They will watch how you behave, how you treat others, how you cope with pressure and whether you follow through on your promises. And they will imitate you. If you talk about ethics and then cut corners at the first opportunity, they will follow your lead.

Set a good example and they will follow it. Plutarch would also warn that your best young employees will use you as a bar to aim for and exceed. That's natural. Let them compete with you and encourage them to go further.

**Epictetus: build a resilient mind-set**

Epictetus grew up a slave in Rome, and then became a Stoic philosopher. Both of these positions were incredibly precarious – slaves could be abused or killed by their owners, while Stoic philosophers were constantly falling foul of the imperial authorities (Epictetus himself was eventually exiled). Epictetus coped with this insecurity by constantly reminding himself what he could control and what he couldn't. We can control our thoughts, beliefs and attitudes, but everything else is to some extent out of our control – other people's perceptions and behaviour, the economy, the weather, the future and the past. If you focus on what is beyond your control, and obsess over it, you will end up feeling helpless. Focus on what you can control, and you will feel a measure of autonomy even in chaotic situations.

This insight is now part of the US Army's $125m resilience training course, which teaches soldiers the Stoic lesson that, even in adverse situations, we always have some choice how we react. We can learn this resilient thinking, and it will make our organisation and employees more capable of reacting to crises. The environment may be worsening, the economy may be double-dipping. Focus on doing what you can, on the practical steps you can take to improve the situation.

**Rufus: keep track of your ethical progress**

Musonius Rufus was known as the Socrates of Rome. He was another Stoic, who taught that philosophy cannot just be theoretical. If you want to be an ethical individual or an ethical company, you can't just study ethics, you have to practise it, every day, to get into good habits. The ancient Greek word for ethics is actually the same word for habit.

You also need to keep track of your progress, to see how you're doing. You can't just rely on your intuitions, because they're often wrong. So the ancient Greeks learned to keep accounts of themselves. They would track their daily behaviour in journals, keeping account of how many times they lost their temper, for example, or got too drunk. Then they could see if they were really improving their behaviour, or just going round in circles.

In organisational terms, keeping track of ourselves means trying to take an evidence-based assessment of our performance. We might say we're a green company, but how do we know if we're making progress? We might say we're a eudaimonic organisation, but how do we know? We can keep track of this, for example by asking our employees (anonymously) how worthwhile they feel their job is. Then see if, in a year, we have managed to enhance their sense of purpose.

**Epicurus: the art of happiness**

Epicurus was a fourth century Greek philosopher who taught, rather scandalously, that the aim of life was simply to be as happy as possible here on Earth, before we die and dissolve back into the atomic universe. He warned that humans are very bad at being happy, and very good at inventing reasons to be miserable. Philosophy should teach us how to be happy, he suggested. For example, it could teach us how to bring our attention to the present moment, to savour it. It could also teach us to limit our desires to what is easy to get, not inflating our needs with endless artificially stimulated desires.

Today, some companies are embracing Epicurus' philosophy, and trying to teach their employees the art of happiness. Tony Hsieh, the CEO of American shoe company Zappos, is so committed to the company's courses in happiness that he sold the company to Amazon on the agreement it would be able to continue with its unique happy culture.

I'm not personally an Epicurean, and think companies should be careful about forcing all their employees to follow one philosophy of the good life. As we've seen, there are many different approaches to achieving eudaimonia. Perhaps companies could create an ethical culture that embraces all these different ways of living.