

# Three Ways to Make Personal Growth Your Top Priority

There is no more important question for knowledge workers and leaders right now than this: “Is my personal growth in tune with the changing external landscape?” You must see personal growth as an urgent necessity to prevent your personal obsolescence.

We are living in the most competitive business environment the world has ever seen and the pace of change is only increasing. Many working in this environment make the mistake of focusing only on the job at hand at the expense of growing their capabilities. Working a hundred hours a week to prove your commitment to the job and meeting all the boss’s goals is pure martyrdom if you are sacrificing personal growth.

Even knowledge workers at the peak of their expertise are at risk of being displaced by shifts in the marketplace, technology, or global competitive landscape. After all, a full-time constituency of scientists, engineers, advertisers, Silicon Valley investors, and others make their livelihoods based on their ability to drive and create change. And change of any kind means new requirements for businesses and their employees. These structural changes in employment happen ever more frequently.

Add to that the fact that smart companies pursue talent wherever it exists globally, and the need to stay current sharpens. We are all familiar with the flow of jobs to call centers in India and factories in China; knowledge workers are not immune to this kind of globalization. The bottom line for knowledge workers is that competition is fierce, and you need to be not only at the top of your game but also well prepared for how the game is evolving.

Managers and leaders must also heed the imperative for personal growth, if only because the knowledge workers in their charge are changing. Millennials will challenge traditional sources of authority, such as information, accumulated experience, and judgment, much of which is available through the internet. Leadership skills may need reinvention.

## **Preventing Your Own Obsolescence**

Be honest with yourself - how much time do you devote to personal growth?

Yes, you are busy. You likely have more demands on your time than ever before. But, if you are not learning new skills, building on your knowledge base, gaining new experiences, and all the while carefully scrutinizing the ways you have traditionally viewed and approached your work, your skill set will become obsolete in today's business environment. When that happens, both you and your company lose.

Here are three simple ways to avoid this fate and make personal growth your top priority:

### **1. Take responsibility for your own growth.**

Don't depend solely on company training programs to expand your capabilities. These programs can be incredibly valuable and access to such programs is a good sign that you are working at a forward-thinking company. Training programs are especially helpful for building networks, seeing things from different viewpoints, and picking up tools, ideas, and frameworks to help you do your job. The truth, however, is that such programs are not enough to help you reach your full potential.

Decide for yourself the ways you want to grow and seek your own opportunities to learn. If you aspire to high levels of leadership, be sure that you are getting exposure to different parts of the business. You could accomplish this by letting your bosses know that you are open to lateral moves, not just promotions, in order to gain exposure.

Or choose a capability you take pride in and try applying it in a different context. Maybe you're good at setting priorities for your department. Test yourself: Which would you choose for the company overall? Why? What do you see in the global environment that informs your viewpoint? Be willing to let go of old habits as you try to acquire new ones and be disciplined in honing your skills. Consistent practice will make new habits and skills second nature.

It's also your responsibility to carve out the time to grow. If you're not devoting a minimum of 10 percent of your time to growth, free up some time by finding capable people to relieve some of your burden and delegate more.

Whatever you need to do to make time for growth opportunities, do it. No excuses. Many of the CEOs I know made growth a habit throughout their careers. Ivan Seidenberg and Jack Welch, for example, former CEOs of Verizon and GE respectively, are voracious readers and eager learners, always seeking new information and ways to improve. I've seen that same desire for personal growth among many people who start at the bottom and work their way to high levels of leadership.

## **2. Make your own luck.**

Assuming responsibility for personal growth is not just about time, but also about finding and seizing opportunities as they arise.

An excellent example of this is an individual who, starting out as a corporate attorney, used every job he held as an opportunity to expand not just his job-related skills but also his leadership ability. Fueled by his focus on personal growth, this individual advanced in his organization, was promoted to higher levels, and given more responsibility, building a strong track record of success and broadening his understanding of business along the way.

Eventually, he became interested in running a business. Realizing his opportunities were limited at his present company, he moved to another organization. He continued to grow and, within a few years, took a job as vice president and general counsel at a large company in another industry. After years of developing as a leader and chasing after personal growth, he is now the CEO of that large company.

Was it luck that made him CEO? Or, did he create his own destiny? It seems that luck has had little to do with his success.

## **3. Seek bosses who will help you grow.**

The fastest growth comes from coaching by an attentive boss. As you consider what job to take, look beyond the entry on your resume. Consider how the boss might contribute to your personal growth.

Look for a boss who gives honest, candid feedback and is willing to take chances on people. Some bosses are more willing than others to give people stretch assignments. Those trial-by-fire experiences are great crucibles for personal growth, especially when combined with thoughtful coaching.

If your current boss is limiting your growth, consider changing jobs. Switching to a boss who is an excellent coach may be the smart move, even if it doesn't appear to be an upward one.

## The Many Rewards of Growth

Growth is about staying relevant by constantly improving and keeping up-to-speed with the changing world around you. Additionally, taking responsibility for your personal growth provides something that can be even more valuable: a sense of control over your own career and your own future.

There are career advancement and financial gains as a result of personal growth, but don't underestimate the "psychic rewards." Downsizings, outsourcing, and relentless globalization are mainstay realities of today's working world. However, as you assume control of your personal growth, you will gain confidence in the fact that your future rests soundly in your own hands.

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