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TURNING A PERSONAL LEADERSHIP
DEVELOPMENT PLAN INTO SOMETHING**

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Crafting a Path Toward Mastery:
Turning a Personal Leadership Development Plan into Something Useful

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It isn't scientific, but my experience has been too consistent to ignore. When working with groups of high potential executives and senior level managers on their leadership development, it goes something like this:

“If you have a formal development plan, please stand up.”

Only a quarter of the group rise, and some of those hesitate.

“Please remain standing if you have a development plan and it deals with something truly important.”

Half of those standing sit down at this point.

“Now remain standing if you have a development plan, it deals with an important issue, and you are actually carrying out.”

The few still standing can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

Even though all of the companies where I have asked these questions have extensive talent management systems that include specific development processes and annual performance reviews, rarely are more than a handful willing to say that they are actively implementing a meaningful development plan. Had I asked if the plans they had were consistent with research on how executives develop, I suspect even fewer, if any, would remain standing. Clearly there is room for improvement. Yet when I told a respected colleague that I was writing this chapter on how to create a personal development plan, he said, “Forget it. There's nothing new to be said about development plans.”

Despite this ominous warning, in this short chapter I will attempt to describe an alternative approach to creating a personal plan for developing leadership ability. To get away from whatever baggage is associated “development plans” as currently conceived, I will use somewhat different language: crafting a path toward mastery. “Crafting” (to make by hand) is meant to suggest that there is no precise formula for engaging in this exercise. Each person is unique and must, for him or herself, craft an approach that recognizes how he/she got here, where he/she wants to go, what he/she needs to learn, and how he/she will go about learning it.

“Path” is meant to suggest that learning and growth is neither a one-shot exercise replayed once a year in annual performance reviews nor a 30-year career plan laid out in exquisite detail. Rather it is a rough path to a general destination that is discovered as it is traveled, a journey characterized by serendipity, changes in direction, and crossroads along the way. And finally, “toward mastery” suggests that developing one’s leadership ability, like learning a craft or becoming an expert, requires a long period of practice and learning during which skills increase as one moves (at least in earlier times) from novice to apprentice to journeyman to master craftsman.

The “by hand” portion of the craftsman’s skill captures the notion that in leadership as in other crafts each person brings a unique touch to the trade. Every hand made violin bears the mark of the artist who made it. The odds of any one of us being here are one in 6 billion at the moment, so each of us is unique and on a private path through this life and career. That said, the path to mastery in leadership requires traveling some common ground,¹ which makes it possible to base an approach on those commonalities without rigid prescriptions or prodigious forms.

The common ground toward leadership mastery includes the following territory. First, effective leadership may be a complex phenomenon requiring a seemingly unlimited array of skills, abilities, and knowledge, but it is not infinite. There is a *bounded domain* of things to learn, basically involving the abilities required to set direction, align key people and groups with that direction, set and model values, develop an executive temperament, and continually grow one’s self and others.² This domain admittedly contains many, many attributes and a great deal of both specialized and generalized knowledge, and it is confounded by equifinality (that there is more than one way to achieve the same outcome), but despite the complexity its component parts can be learned over time.

Mastering leadership, therefore, is a lengthy and perhaps life-long process, requiring *numerous transitions* along the way as one moves from one level of expertise to another. Some of these transitions have been discussed by Linda Hill³ in her magnificent study of the transition from individual contributor to manager, and by Ram Charan and his colleagues in the popular book, *The Leadership Pipeline*.⁴ Their point, of course, is that growth as a leader results from getting through predictable transitions that require dramatic learning (and unlearning). Multiple transitions mean that learning to lead is a *dynamic* process, and that people are required to shed some things, build on some things, and acquire new things as they progress—much like a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly, only multiple times.

This learning is driven primarily by experience, and difficult, *challenging experiences* at that. One does not acquire leadership expertise just by reading books, attending seminars, or passively watching others; rather leadership is learned in the heat of battle (or in “crucibles,” as Warren Bennis⁵ likes to call them). And, of course, because learning to lead takes a long time, requires difficult transitions, and is driven by demanding experiences, it takes a highly motivated individual to travel that path. It may be likened to the trek of world class experts who commit themselves to higher and higher levels of performance and, given what they willingly endure, have been described as having a “*rage to master*.”

These, then, are the defining elements in crafting a path to mastery. Crafting a personal path begins with taking a candid look at what got you this far in terms of proven strengths, demonstrated weaknesses, untested areas, transitions accomplished—what might be seen as finding where you are at the present time on the journey to mastery. From there you must look ahead, given your aspirations, to the next level of mastery and what is required to reach it. This is a process of identifying your “edge” and what specifically is next for you to learn. Finally, the last task is to figure out how what you need to learn can be learned: finding the experience that offers the needed lessons and a way not only to get that experience but to successfully extract the learning from it.

Locating Yourself on the Path to Mastery

A tapestry is an intricate weaving of many different threads. The facing side conveys a coherent scene and individual threads are of little interest. The other side, however, may look confusing and disorganized, with individual threads more prominent than the scene they depict on the front. An individual at any given point in time is a weaving of strengths and weaknesses comprising the whole cloth of life’s experience to that point and the “scene” it has created. But a transition point may be likened to the two sides of a tapestry—the existing pattern of strengths and weaknesses which make a pleasant scene on one side may look entirely different on the other side. It might be called a theory of developmental relativity, because what works quite effectively at one level of mastery may be ineffective at the next level. Some of the behaviors that work well for leading individual contributors, for example, may be quite ineffective after a transition to leading managers or a business unit.

A traditional approach to a development plan also might begin with an assessment, most likely a listing of “proven” competencies and “developmental opportunities” that leads to choosing what one perceives to be a flaw that needs “fixing.” A more productive approach recalls the tapestry with its woven threads—what is a strength now could be a weakness later on; what is a weakness now may have been a strength before or may be a strength in the future. Nuance, not night and day. For example, former Boeing CEO, Phil Condit, was described in BusinessWeek as “...blind to his shortcomings. The skills that made him a brilliant engineer...was of less use in an executive position.”⁶ The implication, of course, is that what had made him successful at one level in his career trajectory became flaws (in the sense that they weren’t the skills needed) at a different level. Carly Fiorina, derailed CEO of Hewlett-Packard, was described in the Wall Street Journal as “unshakeable,” “self-reliant,” “passionate about the big picture,” embracer of change—yet the subtitle of the article is, “How traits that helped executive climb ladder came to be fatal flaws.”⁷ What are flaws at one point in time might be strengths at another—who is to say when the self-confidence required to lead becomes arrogance? One person’s dictator is another person’s “high standards.” Is he stubborn or committed? Is she aloof or objective?

The challenge in a retrospective is to be as candid and objective as possible, including, if feasible, getting the perspective of trustworthy other people. Put in simple terms, one might capture the essence in two questions: “I’ve been successful because of...” and “I’ve been successful in spite of...” The answers to these questions, put in the context of the experiences

you have had, should frame the next stage in your growth. What transition lies ahead that will require something different?

Identifying a Growth Edge

At this point in a traditional development planning approach, having identified strengths and weaknesses, we would identify a “developmental goal” to work on. Goals have a nice, solid feel to them. A goal is something specific you can work toward, accomplish, and then move on to something else. But if we start from a different base, recognizing that strengths and weaknesses are relative and the relationships among them subtle, and if we accept that mastery is achieved only over a long period of time marked by a series of transitions, then we need a more provocative idea than “setting a developmental goal” to preserve the richness of the stage that is set. Research on experts and the acquisition of expertise provides such a concept by referring to the next stage of development as finding one’s edge. The logic is that mastery requires staying on the edge of what has been accomplished, always moving toward the next level. Thinking in terms of a “growth edge” focuses on the transition, of having mastered so much but now seeking the next challenge, of playing on the edge.

Playing on the edge is challenging and exciting, but you can’t do everything at once and on the edge you still must focus on what you need to learn; you still have to get specific—generalities go nowhere. As an example of going from general to specific, let’s assume a growth edge requires becoming a better decision maker. That is far too general, so we have to get it specific enough to actually do something with it. What kinds of decisions would you like to be better at—Capital investment? Selecting talent? Marketing strategy? No doubt you already make decisions on a regular basis, so what is different about the kinds of decisions that lie ahead? What additional skills will they require? What does someone who is good at what you seek to learn know how to do that you don’t? Can you get around people who are good at what you want to learn and watch what they do? If you can answer these questions then you are getting the edge defined in actionable ways.

Acquiring new abilities (becoming more skilled) is a powerful, positive motivator, so even if the edge requires fixing a flaw the objective should be defined not in terms of getting rid of a flaw but rather in terms of acquiring new strengths. For example, being an autocratic leader can be a flaw. But simply trying to stop being autocratic may not be effective, especially since there are times when an autocratic approach is a strength. A more productive approach would be to learn a different style of leading that would then add to the range of possibilities available. An alternative or complementary approach would be to learn how to make autocratic leadership effective under a broader set of conditions-- what makes autocrats effective when they are? Learning to listen effectively to people who know more than they do? Learning to create an environment in which people are confident to speak up? Learning these new skills would be positive in the sense that autocratic behavior would be more effective as a result.

Framing a developmental edge is crucial, not just because a positive objective is more inspiring than fixing problems, but also because it puts the focus on learning rather than simply on doing. If it is something you already know how to do but haven’t done, doing it in the future a good intention but it is not learning something new. For example, “from now on I will include

my people in my decisions” may be a good idea, even an effective response to feedback, but at the same time it is stated as something you already know how to do. If it is something you don’t know how to do-- for instance, not knowing how to involve people effectively in the decisions you have to make-- it would be framed as “I want to learn how to involve my people effectively in the decisions I make.” Framing the objective this way makes it necessary to identify what specifically needs to be learned, and raises important issues that need to be resolved in defining the edge. In this case, what does “effectively” mean? What is it that you don’t know how to do? How would you find out what you need to know to refine this into a do-able learning challenge? What do people who are good at involving others actually do? Be sure that in the end whatever objective you set is phrased as “I want to learn how to...”

It is the initial framing that is crucial. Once clear on what needs to be learned, traditional goal setting approaches may be applied, for example, one of the variations of “SMART” (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timed). However it may be more useful to wait until the whole picture is drawn before drilling down to this very specific level. Completing the picture requires careful consideration of the ways whatever-it-is-you-want-to-learn can be learned.

Learning the Lessons of Experience

Learning to lead, to the extent it can be learned, is rarely the product of reading books or sitting through seminars. The lessons of leadership are learned from experience—and difficult experience at that. Doing more of what one already knows how to do teaches relatively little, while being stretched outside of one’s comfort zone offers a multitude of learnings. But experience does not lend itself easily to planned development. While attending a course may be scheduled months in advance, or a book read at one’s convenience, experience is often serendipitous. People are given assignments for many reasons other than their development, and the timing of opportunity is often determined by circumstance rather than intention. Further, both people and organizations like to keep doing what they are good at—a very rational thing to do unless growth is the objective. And if getting the “right” experience at the right time is tricky, actually learning the lessons an experience offers is also problematic. What a proposition: to grow as a leader, take on something unfamiliar and difficult, most likely at an inconvenient time, with development goals secondary to performance expectations, and with no guarantee of either success or learning. No wonder organizations often have to throw talented people into such situations to develop them rather than wait for them to volunteer. Clearly one aspect of crafting one’s own development is being prepared to take advantage of opportunities that come along (or making opportunities when they don’t come along), and then turning those opportunities into actual learning (more on that later).

Being intentional about experience—in the vernacular, taking charge of one’s own development—means seeking out experiences that can teach the lessons to be learned. While this seems obvious, it isn’t. If you haven’t had an experience how can you know what lessons it might teach? If you know other people who can provide insight into experiences and what’s in them, that’s a definite advantage. But in assessing an opportunity yourself, remember that learning can only occur if the experience provides a challenge in the domain you wish to master. So start by making sure that the challenge you need to face is a significant part of the experience.

Need to learn to motivate people? Then be sure the experience contains people who need motivating. Want to learn to lead a team? Then be sure that the experience requires you to be on a team. Become a more effective decision maker under ambiguity? Then be sure it requires you to make decisions with limited data. Learn to manage in another culture? You must have to work in another culture. In other words, you have to face the very thing you don't know.

Facing what you don't know does not necessarily require taking a different job, although it might. What you seek may lurk in a special project, a temporary assignment, a modification of your current job, or even in volunteer work. But wherever you find it, facing what you don't yet know how to do will put you at risk, making it important to set a context for success (defined as learning what you mean to learn without derailing). In our informal survey of what helps and hinders learning from experience, the immediate boss was the single most important factor one way or the other. If you are lucky enough to have a boss who is developmentally oriented, you can work directly with him or her to create the essential elements of learning from experience: specific learning goals, feedback on learning progress, access to essential resources to support learning, and accountability for achieving the learning goals. Absent such a boss, which will be most of the time, you must find ways to accomplish these things for yourself. Some accountability and feedback can be arranged through peers, subordinates, or colleagues, if you've built trusting relationships. Resources such as 360 feedback, coaching, training, and the like are often available through human resources, or private contract. More difficult to provide without the involvement of a boss is a safety net to ensure that any performance loss that accompanies trying something new is taken into account.

Bosses who are not developmentally oriented can be useful in spite of themselves. Even bad bosses can provide access to valuable experiences (or in the case of the very bad boss, provide the motivation for seeking out a different experience). Observing a boss who is really good at something you'd like to learn can provide invaluable insight into how to do it. The worst bosses still add valuable lessons in what not to do. In short, bosses can be, for better or for worse, a learning experience in themselves.

What to put on a Blank Sheet of Paper

My purpose in writing this chapter was to suggest that traditional personal development plans make conceptual sense but rarely seem to accomplish significant development. That is due, in part, to their being based on a flawed view of how leadership develops. Instead, thinking of development as crafting a path to mastery acknowledges the craft-like nature of leadership development and the long time horizons associated with mastering a complex profession. Development from this perspective requires a sensitivity to transitions and to the nuances of the interplay between strengths and weaknesses (reflected in a thoughtful analysis of how you got where you are), a realistic assessment of where the next edge for development is, and careful analysis of what experiences might offer up the lessons that would take you to the next level. The risk of taking on experiences that require learning new skills can be managed by building a supportive context around them. If that be true, then the best way to craft a plan for leadership development is to take a blank piece of paper and provide your personal answers to four questions:

- What got you here and what is likely to change?

- Where is your growth edge?
- What experiences offer the lessons you need to learn?
- How will create a supportive context?

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus is credited with the observation that “the life so short, the craft so long to learn.” So it is with becoming an effective leader.

¹ I am grateful to David Oldfield whose book, Private Paths Common Ground, (Washington DC: The Foundation for Contemporary Mental Health, 1991) inspired this way of thinking.

² These are the categories derived from the “lessons learned” by successful executives as documented in Morgan McCall, Mike Lombardo, & Ann Morrison, The Lessons of Experience (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books, 1988), and replicated by Morgan McCall, & George Hollenbeck, Developing Global Executives (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002)

³ Linda Hill, Becoming a Manager (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1992).

⁴ Ram Charan, Stephen Drotter, & James Noel, The Leadership Pipeline (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001).

⁵ Warren Bennis & Robert Thomas, Geeks and Geezers (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

⁶ Stanley Holmes, “Boeing What Really Happened” (BusinessWeek cover story, December 15, 2003).

⁷ Pei-Wing Tam, “H-P’s Board Ousts Fiorina as CEO” (The Wall Street Journal, February 10, 2005, A-1).