

Leadership Development

A deep dive into retooling for a changing world

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As tempting as it is to ignore professional growth and development when we are in the midst of crisis, protracted trauma and endless uncertainty, this is exactly the time when a focus on learning is critical. Leaders have to retool. Sometimes they also need to recharge and redirect. Each of these imperatives requires deep-dive leadership development. The process detailed below can be used for an individual or applied to groups of leaders in an organization. The examples cite individual usage, however, each step can be scaled for groups of leaders.

Where does this type of development start? If you have read my previous articles you know that I am a big fan of emotional intelligence. While I see that as an important starting point, there is a need for a deeper level of mindfulness to prepare for the most substantial development.

The Mindfulness Challenge

What, exactly, does mindfulness look like for leaders? It begins with getting off the madness merry-go-round. That sounds so simple and, yet, we know that it is not. It is near impossible when you are in the eye of the storm. However, even the most turbulent storms have moments where the wind and rain let up just a little bit. These brief moments should be used to develop the ability to be fully present, meaning that we stop multitasking and focus on a single intention. That intention may be to learn how to deal with conflict. It may be to develop a systems approach to virtual team leadership. Another potential intention may be to create wellness supports in the organization. The list of potential intentions is endless.

Mindfulness seems counterintuitive and, perhaps, counterproductive in times of rapid change. Yet the stillness of quiet reflection is what gives you the opportunity to marshal your internal resources so you can be more impactful in your leadership role. The other benefit of developing the capacity to be mindful is that it is a tool that moves you from reaction to thoughtful responsiveness. In other words, as we become more mindful, we become better able to think issues through and devise purposeful strategies. This is not easy, but it is necessary.



The Subject Search

Going deep on your development or creating ways for others to focus on their growth requires what I call “The Subject Search.” What do you know very little about that could help you and your company successfully move forward? Do you know very little about formulating value propositions? Do you know very little about evaluating strategy? Do you know very little about vertical integration? Do you know very little about emerging technologies that are impacting your industry?

Conducting your own subject search requires you to look at your company, your industry and the larger business environment. It requires you to have sufficient humility to acknowledge the vast world of things that you do not know. This is not to say that the things you have mastered have no value. In fact, your existing knowledge base will be a foundation for the new subjects that you need to move confidently into the future.

As you look at the subjects that present you with opportunities for learning and growth (and there will be many), examine them through a lens of curiosity. Think about what you want to learn and why. Think about what is interesting in the subjects. Think about the ways in which the subjects connect to other bodies of knowledge that you already have.

Consider nuances of the subjects. For example, if you recognize the need to learn about the nuances of digital

marketing, you want to explore search engine optimization, social media platforms and paid advertising strategies.

Think beyond the surface of the subjects. After you have decided what you are going to focus on learning and have looked at it from multiple angles, the next step is to prioritize your learning. When we are in rapidly changing environments, the priorities are typically set by pressing business needs. You will probably determine which subject to tackle based on the wind that is about to blow you over.

If you have the luxury of selecting a topic, do it based on your intellectual curiosity. What piques your interest? Or, you may set priorities based on what you know is heading your way. For example, a CFO knew that her company was going to be sold and that the owner was looking to her for advice and guidance when working with the business broker and when analyzing potential offers. She also knew that the transaction had a high likelihood of being a very

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contentious acquisition and not a friendly sale. Since she knew this was coming, she made sure she boned up on mergers, acquisitions and sales.

Designed Development

Each step in the deep dive rests on the mindfulness that you cultivated at the beginning of the process. As you reflect and go inward, you will be able to design the development plan that supports your

intended trajectory. You will be able to figure out ways to make where you have landed become where you launch.

When formulating your plan, give serious consideration to using multiple approaches to learning. This means reading, experiences, connecting with experts and any number of other strategies that will help you deepen your development.

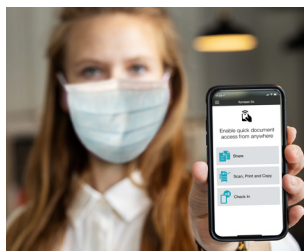
It is now up to you to design a development plan — a learning map. This means reviewing the subjects you have prioritized and then plotting a clear course for enhancing your knowledge base. A boilerplate for development has little

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value. It is essential that you craft the plan that will work best for you. Begin by selecting the highest-priority subject. Conduct initial research on the topic. Use publications like Forbes, Harvard Business Review, Entrepreneur, Fast Money and Office Technology to scan the topic.

After your initial scan, select two or three articles that you want to read. Do not stop there. Do a little research on books that will expand your understanding of the subject. You may be thinking, “I do not have time to read.” In that case, subscribe to Audible or another service that allows you to listen rather than read.

There are many learning modalities that supplement reading. Consider scanning YouTube for tutorials or other videos on the topics that interest you. Do not limit yourself to TED Talks, though they are very valuable. Find industry experts, commentators and contrarians who can deepen your knowledge. We live in an age of endless webinars. Take advantage of them. They can be great learning opportunities.

Finally, beyond reading and watching, consider subscribing to multiple podcasts. The best podcasts constantly update their content and offer episodes of varying lengths. Challenge yourself to find learning that explores your interests from multiple perspectives.

So far, you have conducted your scan to find resources. The next step is to create a learning schedule. Be realistic. Do not sabotage yourself by creating goals that are too lofty. Perhaps start with spending 30 minutes a week learning about your topic. That may mean watching something on YouTube, listening to a podcast on your commute or reading a short article.

As you progress in your development, add to the time you devote to it. Keep yourself interested and challenged by varying the tools you use. If you are most comfortable reading, watch a video to stimulate your brain in a different way. The shifts will prevent boredom and expose you to more information delivered in different formats.

You need to measure and monitor your developmental process. My preference is for quarterly check-ins. Focus on a subject for an entire quarter. At the end of the quarter, assess what you have learned and how you have applied it. Keep track of the additional areas you want to explore related to that quarter’s topic. The next quarter, move to your next learning priority. You may follow the same approach that you used initially or you may decide to try a different approach to learning.

The Human Element

Learning this type of deep leadership development cannot

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exist only in the cerebral realm. You have to connect with people who know more than you. Introduce yourself to those folks and schedule time to connect. People love it when others are interested in their expertise. Do not be shy about reaching out to industry experts, authors and others who share your interests.

The human element extends to teaching others what you are learning. Volunteer to facilitate short training sessions for the company. Host lunch-and-learn sessions for your team.

One of the smartest things organizations can do to leverage their learning budget is to require people who have attended training and education to come back and teach the core principles in the organization. The other value of sharing what you are studying is that it cements it in your own head. It also opens the door to questions from others that will help you go deeper in your learning. Sharing the knowledge also creates a core of other learners — a critical mass.

Summary

The steps presented above are cyclical. You will become more mindful, search for subjects, design your development, act on what you have designed and integrate the human element in your learning. That will take you right back to going deeper in your mindfulness, exploring the next subject, crafting a new developmental plan, taking action and going back to the human element.

The cycle is what keeps you committed to more than surface or cursory learning. It firms your dedication to your own growth. None of this is easy in the midst of crises and calamities, but it is necessary. The skill building that comes from going deep in your development is what will enable you to lead with stronger impact. The skill building also adds to your value as a leader and ensures a bit more career security. Not job security, career security. That is the security what gives you options in turbulent times. ■

Joanne L. Smikle, Ph.D., a respected authority on leadership and organization development, provides virtual and on-site services to businesses across the country. She prepares leaders for an ever-evolving world. Beyond Smikle’s work with organizations, she provides individual development that goes beyond coaching for leaders who want to devote attention to their career trajectories.

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