

Personal best

The continuous process of learning to be a self-leader

by Kathryn J. Deiss

Leadership development—the opportunity to grow, learn, practice, and gain insights into one's own capacity to lead others. This could be a description acceptable to most. But how does leadership development occur?

Is it always, for instance, an opportunity given by others? An opportunity to attend formal training, a new position, or a challenging work assignment are examples of leadership development opportunities granted to many of us throughout our careers. Most often these opportunities are provided as recognition of excellence in our present and past performance, and with hope in our future performance.

But this is not the only path—nor is it the most effective path—to developing as a leader, particularly as a leader for whom learning is a “way of being,” as Peter Vaill¹ names it. It is clear that we must tend to our own self-understanding and growth through the process of self-leadership.

What is self-leadership?

To lead others one has first to lead oneself. In describing leadership as a “process of influencing others,” author Charles Manz² indicates that self-leadership can be seen as a process of “influencing ourselves.” This influencing behavior, in my view, can be described as a learning behavior and is the very heart of leadership development.

What does self-leadership imply? How does one become truly self-leading? Each of us needs to look within to see where the real work-

shop is. The three arenas in which self-leadership is attended to are: self-awareness of personal values, intentions, and behavior and of the impact these have on those around us; personal vision of where one wants to go; and learning skills that will allow one to seize opportunities to contribute and to influence others to contribute.

Self-awareness

Knowing who and what we want to be is important, but knowing who we *are* is crucial. Self-awareness—of values, intentions, strengths and weaknesses—is the basis of internal leadership. A commitment to self-awareness signals a willingness to be in a state of unknowing—where one doesn't actually have all the answers, where one is a learner in the deepest sense of the word.

Many years ago, I was asked to speak to a group of architecture faculty and librarians about the future of librarians as educators. I urged librarians to encourage a state of “unknowing”—a state of questioning rather than a state of assertion—in the students they helped. Now I find myself often reflecting on this advice as it applies to leadership. We must welcome a state of unknowing in ourselves to become great, or even good, leaders.

Self-awareness through feedback

Researcher Morgan McCall³ says, “Lack of awareness, whether through neglect or arrogance, is a major contributor to derailment.”

About the author

Kathryn J. Deiss is program manager for the Office of Leadership and Management Services with the Association of Research Libraries, e-mail: kdeiss@nwwu.edu

Our leadership development depends not only on our self-understanding and awareness, but also on our willingness to be influenced by others: seeking others' appraisals of our greatest flaws and acting to change our behavior and attitudes. Listening to our critics as well as our supporters is the first step toward self-awareness. It is in listening closely for dissonance, biases and ignorance within ourselves, in addition to our positive traits, that we will know where to work on our leadership.

To accomplish this, we can seek feedback in formal and informal ways; most often feedback comes from one's immediate supervisor. However, we often profit from appraisal from those we closely work with on a daily basis. Some organizations use multi-rater or 360 degree feedback instruments that provide formal and rich feedback from people who observe our behavior and work. These surveys are a most powerful means of securing honest responses. Use of these instruments enables one to compare one's self-concept with views of other respondents.

Whatever methods we choose for seeking feedback, and they should be various, the key is to take a proactive rather than a passive stance toward securing that feedback. There is no substitute for multi-dimensional views of our behavior and its impact on others and on the work of the organization.

Creating a personal vision

The keystone of self-leadership is to know what one wants to become or achieve. Just as organizations founder without a clear vision, so do individuals founder and misdirect energies without a clear and compelling vision to lead them. In *Voices of Our Ancestors: Cherokee Teachings from the Wisdom Fire*, Dhyani Ywahoo describes the Cherokee formula for success: clear intention (meaning knowing your purpose); skillful means; and affirmation (meaning personal vision and work must not clash with individual values).⁴

Developing a personal vision requires taking time to deeply reflect upon one's own desires. Many guides to the process of personal visioning can be found in leadership literature; the works of Stephen Covey, Morgan McCall, and Charles Manz are excellent sources.

Learning in context: The importance of environmental awareness

Creating self-awareness and a personal vision occur in a context: as they develop skills, self-

leaders are always aware of what is required by their professions and organizations at any given moment. A deep comprehension of and active participation in the life of one's profession creates momentum and a sense of engagement and purposeful intent without which the work of developing as a self-leader would not be meaningful.

Understanding the evolving environment of our profession and discovering the competencies we need to excel in requires that we ask questions, read as much as possible, and most importantly, connect with those with whom we are *not* most naturally associated. While we are accustomed to learning from those within our immediate range, we need to also be able to learn from distant connections. These can be people and groups that are seemingly distant from one's immediate field of interest or circle of colleagues, or they can be members of a competing industry. These distant connections have the power of alerting us to a wider body of knowledge and stimulus, as well as keeping us from becoming parochial in our views.

Conclusion

Leadership is a learning process. While some are seemingly born with strong leadership instincts, there are aspects of leadership that need to be learned as we go. Continuously learning about our own characteristics and behaviors and then influencing those for positive development is the key to being a self-leader. The will to develop our leadership from within, through a process of self-discovery and learning, creates the most powerful and lasting changes.

Notes

1. Vaill, Peter. *Learning As A Way of Being: Strategies for Survival in a World of Permanent White Water*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.
2. Manz, Charles C. *Mastering Self-Leadership: Empowering Yourself for Personal Excellence*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1992.
3. McCall, Morgan W. Jr. *High Flyers: Developing the Next Generation of Leaders*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1998.
4. Ywahoo, Dhyani. *Voices of Our Ancestors: Cherokee Teachings from the Wisdom Fire*. Boston: Shambhala, 1987. ■

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