

Thoughts on Professional Development During the Pandemic

Focus. Plan. Do!

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It goes without saying that the Year 2020 has turned into a world where our sense of control, our ability to see the future, and our clarity of outcomes has evaporated. This has left us to operate in a state of “threat” and unknown, without certainty or control, which in turn inhibits optimal functioning both mind and body. In this exhausting environment it’s often impossible to strategize, create, or even think of new ideas.

One of the few benefits of the pandemic, however, has been “found time” for personal growth. And thinking about our own personal growth plans allowed us to step back and review all we know about sustainable personal development. Just what is current best practice in development? How have recent developments in neuroscience informed us about human change? How can we maximize the odds of *real* positive change? And finally, what are the challenges to growth during the continuing COVID-19 crisis?

It is common to start a development process after completing a 360 process where we’ve received a ton of feedback (good and bad). Another scenario is to begin a developmental cycle after a performance review where we received a lot of feedback.

In both instances it is our natural human tendency is to gravitate to the negative feedback. That also causes a “threat” state in our minds, and limits our ability to learn, develop, and grow. Making any change is difficult, not to mention during times of threat.

Given this pandemic environment for the foreseeable future, what are the classic, and current, principles for putting together a successful, sustainable development plan.

1. FORMAL PLAN

This first step is an obvious one, and it is simply to have a formal development plan. We often have reliable and precise feedback through a 360, assessment center or performance appraisal that has identified our developmental areas, but 80% of the energy seems to be put into diagnosis and only 20% into actual robust development with accountability. Simply put, if you're serious about change you should be serious about planning it.

2. DIAGNOSE USING A COMPETENCY MODEL

A reliable diagnosis against an ideal state is needed to help surface true strengths and opportunity for growth. People often are attracted to developing an interest, as opposed to developing a need. A well-researched competency model provides a template and a vocabulary to define the actual knowledge and skillsets needed at work, i.e., a complete competency model. Absent a model, development is often diffuse and unfocused. There is over half a century of research on the competencies needed to succeed at work.

3. FOCUS

Distinct limited, objectives are needed. Don’t bite off more than you can chew – be precise (don’t boil the ocean). From your diagnosis choose one or two competencies to improve at a time.

Neuroscience suggests its necessary focus on a few key critical behaviors that we’d like to shift, that will create the perceived effectiveness. Focus, attention, and repetition is key to *habit creation*, necessary for growth and change. And, to reiterate our previous insight, this may be more difficult in times of threat state (pandemic, change, uncertainty). These threats fire up our brain’s limbic system and direct available resources to protect us, fight or flight, which can impact and impair our cognitive capabilities and ability to focus and execute on the breadth and depth of daily activities.

So once again it's important to have a few clear and focused developmental objectives. Can you imagine a fitness goal that includes quitting smoking, running a marathon, and losing 25 pounds *all at the same time*?

Focus is dramatically illustrated in the famous video "invisible gorilla" experiment by Daniel Simons at Harvard in 1999, when observers were asked to count the number of ball passes between a group of kids wearing white and black shirts, and a gorilla walks through undetected! Observers missed the gorilla because their attention was focused counting passes of balls - people are wired to see what we ask them to focus on. Focus those around you on the "positive behaviors" you are working on displaying, and ask them to acknowledge when they see you showcasing these.

4. IMAGINE A PREFERRED FUTURE

It's a good idea to imagine a perfect execution, i.e., create and rehearse a mental rendition of your new competence, what it looks and feels like. Create a preferred vision of successful performance.

In neuroscience this principle is known as reappraisal or as we like to call it, *Framing Positively Forward*. We all, unfortunately, have a negativity bias. We are wired to see feedback as a possible threat, and when we operate under a threat state negative emotions are stronger than positive emotions. Our brain's functioning is impaired and reduces our ability to perceive, think, ideate, and collaborate.

Getting ourselves to focus on what positively motivates us to change; what is that new or different outcome, result, plus how will we "feel" once we make the change? Associating our achievement of new behaviors with positive motivations (outcomes and feelings) "*I will exceed my sales target, I will be on-plan, I will grow my customer base, I will allow others to share their thoughts and learn from their perspectives,*" with positive emotions - we are moving "toward" a positive outcome, a feeling of "*empowerment, balance, happiness, accomplishment*" if I do "x," versus focusing on trying to eliminate or overcome a negative feeling like "*don't miss your sales target, don't show a gap to your plan, don't lose customers, don't lash out at others - so I don't feel disappointed, unsuccessful, remorseful.*"

When we focus on the positive, and the feelings and "reward" that we receive from doing these new behaviors, we create a positivity offset from a traditional ingrained negativity bias. And how amazing does it feel to be running toward something great, instead of running from or trying to avoid something negative.

5. SET GOALS

Goals, milestones, checkups along the way are absolutely necessary. They are touchstones to measure progress and alert your key supporters when it's time for feedback. We all *know* that SMART goals motivate as well as provide metrics to measure progress. So strive to set specific (behavioral), measurable, attainable, relevant and time phased goals.

6. IDENTIFY YOUR MOTIVE

"What's in it for me?" (WIIFM) and "how I want to feel" when I achieve my goal is super important. You need persistent motivation to sustain development over time. Create a giant pot of gold at the end of your developmental rainbow. Identify the true reward for your developmental work. Experienced coaches suggest that if you cannot find a truly exciting motivation to change then move on to another goal.

7. ENLIST A SUPPORT GROUP

It does take a village to grow. Having mentors, coaches, supporters on your team is important – for feedback, emotional support, and accountability. Enlist a *Community of Champions*;

surround yourself with a team of accountability partners. Creating a growth oriented environment through authentic dialogue, discovery, and inspired thinking by all stakeholders surrounding you in your ecosystem (boss, peers, subordinates, customers, and partners, and friends), enlisting them as allies in your development, allows a supportive and reinforcing approach to testing out new behaviors and positively reinforcing and acknowledging the change. People tend to notice you are developing a new skill/competency when you “focus” them on what you are working on; your “invisible gorilla”. Engage your social network to be part of your development process.

This need for a support network has been reinforced by research done by Marshall Goldsmith and Howard Morgan. They report that: *“Time and again, one variable emerged as central to the achievement of positive long term change: the participant’s ongoing interaction and follow-up with colleagues. Leaders who discussed their own improvement priorities with their co-workers and then regularly followed up with these co-workers, showed striking improvement.”*

8. BUILD ACTION STEPS

To truly grow you need to take focused *action*, i.e., schedule formal learning (workshops/books/webinars/etc.), schedule on-the-job experiences (projects, skill practices, etc.), solicit feedback and coaching (mentors, coaches, colleagues, and friends). You need knowledge, experience (practice), and coaching to complete your action plan.

In your action plan address both mindset (what you believe) and skillset (how you behave) gaps in your chosen competency. As you’ve seen in our recommendation on positive thinking, part of positively framing forward is to explore your closely held beliefs. Do you *believe* people are basically good and want to do good work? Do you *believe* the world is abundant and win-win is possible? Do you *believe* you can make a difference? If you do not hold these beliefs then you need to address them in your action plan.

9. LIST POSSIBLE OBSTACLES

It is important to stay positive and focus on building a new set of skills and habits, but the change literature suggests that identifying possible challenges in making the needed change can help in preparing to overcome them, and manage expectations along the way. Forewarned is forearmed. Sometimes just identifying an obstacle helps in overcoming it. So expect setbacks, but learn from them.

10. CELEBRATE SUCCESS

Embrace the concept of “win every day.” Take stock of your small inspired actions that you commit to, and recognize yourself for progress. Acknowledge that others are also seeing you grow and succeed. Anchor on that positive “feeling” you said you would feel when you demonstrate your new competence.

In sum, if you are truly serious about personal growth then you *must* be serious about planning to improve. This means putting in place a formal plan with accountability.

The ultimate motive for continued growth and learning is the gift of curiosity and goal of self-actualization we humans possess. Lifelong learning and growth are part of life’s essential meaning. Growth and change are part of the joy of living.