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What to learn in personal development

By Michael Wood It is difficult for me to wrap my head around the notion that I have been knocking around the business world for over 40 years. What is interesting to me as I take a long look back is that early on in my career, I made a conscious commitment to continuously develop myself personally and professionally. Believe it or not, the easiest part of that development was on the professional side. Formal education, continuing education requirements to maintain my credentials and such kept the learning discipline alive. But the personal development side was much more challenging as it required a process of continuous reflection and introspection—growing the ability to be critical of my own actions, interactions and performances in a way that allowed me to benefit from both mistakes and successes. One thing I can say with certainty is that every day presents each of us with an opportunity to learn. But that learning only has value if it is internalized and made part of our overall being. Active learning requires a belief that we can be better than we are professionally, technically, socially, introspectively and more. When a commitment is made to continuous self-development, we make a commitment to self-mastery—and that is a journey that truly never ends. One of the techniques I used during the peak of my professional career was to end each day by completing a personal performance scorecard. I know…it sounds a bit excessive and obsessive, but as I was struggling to fit into the corporate world as a C-level executive, I needed a tool to help me make massive improvements to my “get along” and other social competency skills. This daily process really helped me to stay disciplined, objective and focused. Every day, I filled out a journal that allowed me to rate myself in a number of areas including: Internal energy state throughout the day – Helps to build awareness of energy and mood trends. Assessment of expressed interest – How well did I listen, how focused was I on the topic and not on myself, how engaged was I in the conversation, etc.? Assessment of each meeting - In terms of mood, attitude, use of humor, use of open-ended questions, talk time consumed, outcome desired, outcome achieved, conflicts encountered, conflict learning, etc. Interpersonal lessons learned – What went well, what needs to be improved on, ideas for making improvements. Giving/contributing – What was given? What was the impact? What follow-up is needed? What I learned from this daily process was that over time, my perceptual acuity of my attitude and behavior improved along with my ability to meter and calibrate such things in real time. The above is just an example of a way to integrate formal personal development into a daily routine. Learning to live each day as a participant in the process—and as an observer of that participation—takes practice. It improves your strategic thinking skills as you learn to contemplate the cause and effect of your actions before taking those actions. It improves your emotional self-control and keeps negative ego issues in check. You become a better listener and learn to ask questions that engage others while improving your understanding and empathy for their points of view. You become more proactive and less reactive in situations. People tend to see you as a leader, someone who is reasonable, intelligent and objective. In addition, learning where you need improvement helps identify the reading/listening programs, workshops and retreats that will help mitigate weaknesses and build on strengths. So, what lessons have I learned in my journey that might help you in yours? Humbly, I submit the following. They represent some hard learned lessons and some that came during those “Aha!” moments we can only hope to have more of. Hopefully, you might find some of these lessons insightful. Consider using the ones that resonate with you as ones you might revisit in your own daily learning assessment process. Over the years, if all goes well, the learning evolves into wisdom and mastery: Be a facilitative and collaborative leader. For some, this ability comes easy. For me, not so much. For those of us that lean more soloist and directive in their management style, learning to help others discover and shape solutions is not easy. This ability often requires coaching and some formal learning experience. There are techniques that need to be mastered (including active listening) and those related to emotional self-control. What helped me was knowing that by taking a more facilitative and collaborative approach to leading, my teams I got the benefit of keeping options open and learning what others think. After all, I could always fall back on a directive style of management if push came to shove. Be easy to work with. When you are easy to work with, people tend to gravitate your way. They are more open and candid because they don’t see you as a threat. Being easy to work with begins by never being the source of angst or being the one that complicates things. Being easy to work with means you convey a positive, upbeat, can-do attitude and are always reaching out to help. Your ability to communicate complex or technical issues in an easy-to-understand way helps people understand without feeling intimidated. When you are easy to work with, you keep the intensity and pace in check. You bring people along in a way that makes them feel valued. You know how to keep your ego in check. You are unflappable. Being easy to work with is a huge success factor that can be a game changer. Be the go-to person. Being viewed as the go-to person within the organization means you are respected and valued. You are the one that management turns to when they need to get things done. You have a success record of coming through in a pinch. You know how to cut through the clutter and the fog, build support and constituencies and facilitate successful change. When you can wear this badge, your star rises very quickly. Be that person. Build on success. We always hear that we need to learn from our failures. While this is true, it is just as true that you need to learn from your successes. Successes should not be taken in stride. Every success should be examined as to what caused it to happen and how can those things be replicated going forward. This examination process promotes your awareness of the factors that set a success apart from failure. It makes you and your team consciously competent as opposed to being lucky. Even if the success is that of others, it is worth looking into the whys and the wherefores of that success. Part of lessons learned is learning from successes. Engage and demonstrate interest while staying healthily detached. Being genuinely engaged in a project or process demonstrates that you care about it. However, getting emotionally attached to the same can set you up for failure. When you care more about a project, framework, technology or programming language more than management (or worse yet, more than the outcome to be achieved), you lose objectivity and might be seen as an idiolog. This means your judgment might be corrupt and management may not trust that you will put the needs of the stakeholders before your own. While your intentions may be noble and honorable, when you are seen as a zealot, rarely do you thrive within the organization. Be an active listener. Active listening is basically the process of asking open-ended questions (those that can’t be answered with a “yes” or a “no”), confirming understanding of answers through summation and paraphrasing what you heard, and then moving the conversation forward with a meaningful new question. It is all about making the conversation about the other person in a way they feel heard and understood. When you finish other people’s thoughts, interrupt to editorialize or opine, or bring the conversation back to you, you are not actively listening. Active listeners talk less and listen more. They never dominate the air time in conversations or meetings. When people repeat themselves in conversations it is often because they don’t feel like they were heard or understood. By paraphrasing and getting confirmation that you heard is what was intended, the communication loop is completed and people can move on. Here is a simple example. You ask, “What was the best memory from your vacation?” They respond, “Our trip to the Grand Canyon was amazing. We took a helicopter ride right into the canyon. You respond… “That must have been exciting.” (Not active listening; you drew a conclusion that wasn’t expressed.) “What time of year did you go?” (Not active listening; you went to a new aspect of the vacation without acknowledging what was shared.) “I went to the Grand Canyon last year and really enjoyed the donkey ride down the steep trails.” (Not active listening; you totally disregarded their experience and turned the conversation back to you.) “A helicopter ride into the Grand Canyon?” (Active listening with a question to confirm you heard what they shared.) Their response: “Yes, and it was so exciting and beautiful.” (The “yes” response is validation that they feel you heard what they said). That simple exchange represents a closed-loop communication and sets up the conversation for related and more exploratory questions—maybe along the theme about what made the ride exciting or what the most beautiful parts of the canyon were. Notice the lack of editorial comments, conclusions or focus on you in the conversation. You are facilitating the recall of an experience that was important to the other person and spending time on better understanding that experience. Be wise and selective when expressing and sharing opinions. Having been accused from time to time as being overly opinionated, I have learned that people don’t necessarily appreciate the editorialization of their ideas and/or actions. This is especially true when those opinions are not solicited. When we editorialize, we are shifting focus away from facts and often stating our opinion as if it was fact. This does not mean we can’t weigh in on a topic and give our 2 cents worth. However, in most cases, it is best to get others to weigh in first and to facilitate them until you see things through their eyes. Once three to five points have been expressed, you can summarize them and ask if you understood what they were sharing. Now the stage is set for you to offer your view. This is best done by first asking permission to share your thoughts—and when done, summarizing where you believe the opinions align and differ. Once this is done, the odds of pursuing a meaningful dialogue are greatly enhanced. This is a very effective way to approach conflict resolution situations and negotiations. There are literally thousands of lessons that I have learned over the past 40-plus years of working with people and organizations to implement positive change. The above are just a sampling of those lessons. Some lessons were hard learned and came only after much failure and introspection, others through reflecting on success. The lessons are always there for the learning if we are openly committed to continuous personal development. What are some of the lessons you have learned that have shaped your personal development? What practices and processes do you use to integrate learning into your daily life? What elements from this article did you find helpful? Your thoughts and feedback are always welcome and valued. This article can be found at . About the Author Michael R. Wood is a Business Process Improvement & IT Strategist Independent Consultant. He is creator of the business process-improvement methodology called HELIX and founder of The Natural Intelligence Group, a strategy, process improvement and technology consulting company. He is also a CPA, has served as an Adjunct Professor in Pepperdine's Management MBA program, an Associate Professor at California Lutheran University, and on the boards of numerous professional organizations. Mr. Wood is a sought after presenter of HELIX workshops and seminars in both the U.S. and Europe.

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