



Learning to Manage Attention as a Leadership Development Strategy

It is easy to get sidetracked as technology gains people's attention. Losing focus on personal learning can hinder job performance and suppress leadership development.

In the technology filled personal and work environments most people operate in today, there is little time for reflection. It is too easy to just let the flow of information take control of thoughts, time, and effort. The consequence is that people fail to nurture their personal values and strengths that form the foundation of leadership development. Stepping back to make a personal self-assessment requires backing away from the barrage of electronic devices and instant information that bombards people in their personal and work lives.

Almost 2,500 years ago, Confucius said, "To become a leader, you must first become a human being." Leadership is an expression of emotional, psychological, and physical qualities rather than a gift of power. Consider that very powerful leaders in history have failed, despite having the formal authority. As technology gains a deeper and deeper hold on people's time and attention, it is important to develop the habit of stepping back and spending time on self-learning that promotes knowledge growth, while at the same time identifying strengths to develop and weaknesses to overcome.

If this all sounds a bit philosophical, consider this: How can a person make good judgment calls if there is nothing to measure against? Since technology has led to the ability to create enormous and steady flows of information, it is easy to get sidetracked into thinking that good decisions are always based on the amount of data accumulated. Developing leadership skills begins by taking a journey into yourself to gain self-knowledge, being willing to learn from others, and continually re-assessing and re-balancing to build on strengths.

[An Intense Journey Into Yourself](#)

After Jeffrey R. Immelt succeeded Jack Welch as CEO of General Electric, he said during a speech, "The first part of leadership is an intense journey into yourself. It's a commitment and an intense journey into your soul. How fast can you change? How willing are you to take feedback? Do you believe in self-renewal? Do you believe in self-reflection."¹ The implication is that self-assessment first requires identifying core values that drive all future thoughts and actions.



Reflection is an important part of the journey because it represents an effort to identify aspirations, values, dreams, goals, and what is most important in personal terms. This self-knowledge can drive the development of leadership capacity. A.G. Lafley, former CEO of Proctor & Gamble, had a personal belief that leaders can only focus on solutions if perspectives grow from within the person. He said that to have good leadership capabilities you must, “first know yourself...You need to understand your value system...what is really meaningful to you...what you really care about...what counts in your life.”² The personal knowledge promotes development of leadership capacity.

In this context, leadership capacity applies to all levels of staff because each person has working relationships, the ability to choose productivity levels, and the means for approaching work with innovative thinking. Leadership is often viewed as a quality only belonging to those with authority, and that is not true. When it is time to make decisions, think innovatively, build working and personal relationships, and promote team cohesion, the set of choices is driven by the degree to which leadership capacity has been developed, and leadership capacity begins with self-learning. Those who have not spent the time to understand their core values and competencies are not in a good position to make the right decisions about business related core values and capabilities. It does not take a big leap to question if the lack of introspection driven by access to fast-paced technology has led to the growing number of examples of unethical behaviors by employees and businesses

[Emotional Intelligence and Intellectual Arrogance](#)

Both General Electric and Proctor & Gamble are recognized as two of the most successful companies in this century. As globalization and diversity become business drivers, the successful companies will be those with staff who have developed their emotional intelligence and identified areas of intellectual arrogance. Peter Drucker points out that being bright is not a substitute for knowledge because knowledge equates to personal empowerment. Bright just means someone is intelligent. In an era of globalization and diversity, intellectual arrogance is a roadblock to progress. A person who does not understand the importance of developing relationships with diverse groups of people in a connected world will obviously make little effort in this direction. Unfortunately, too many people today are replacing personal relationship building with superficial technology-based activity.

Personal knowledge grows through introspection and feedback. It surprises some people when successful managers like Immelt and Lafley discuss topics like personal assessment, values, and journeys, rather than hard core business issues. For them the most successful employees are those willing to learn about themselves first and willing to use that knowledge to develop what Drucker calls a “spirit of good performance.” To achieve this position, identify personal qualities and strengths and spend the time evaluating outcomes



of decisions and actions. If the outcomes on any level – personal, emotional, performance – were not the ones desired, decide what learning should follow to improve.

Intellectual arrogance holds back many people from full development of capabilities because it makes them unwilling to learn from others. Grow emotional intelligence to improve communication skills, teambuilding or participation, critical thinking skills, people interactions, and work-life balance. Despite the tremendous benefits of technology, it has led to enormous pressure being placed on people to multitask, increasing emotional and physical stress. There are expected to learn new technologies at a rapid rate, creating uncertainty and self-doubt and distracting them from personal development. One of the benefits of taking time for introspection is that personal strengths are identified, and that can help anyone overcome a tendency towards negative thinking. It is more important to focus on what can be contributed to work and personal lives by relying on personal values and strengths.

Step back and take the time to understand how to accelerate learning on the inside. It is highly likely there are suppressed leadership capabilities waiting for expression.