
Review Article

Leadership and personal growth: Strategies for becoming a better leader

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Received: July 15, 2024

Revised: January 26, 2025

Accepted: January 30, 2025

Abstract

Personal growth plays a significant role in leadership. As long as leaders are still accountable for their people and organizations, they should not take personal growth for granted. Good leaders are lifelong learners, and they strive for excellence in their field. Drawing on the second data, this review article aims to discuss the association between leadership and personal growth. It begins with the importance of personal growth to leaders themselves, their employees, and their organizations. Then, the article outlines three major components for effective leadership development, including the right mindset, the right practice, and the right contribution. In the right mindset, leaders need to embrace a growth mindset, a beginner mindset, and a failing forward mindset. In the right practice, leaders need to understand the phases of leadership development, be curious, be like a sponge, target leadership skills, excel in character skills, get comfortable with discomfort, partner with growth-minded people, learn to become a reader, and design an effective system. In the right contribution, leaders share their knowledge, wisdom, experience, expertise, and other skills to benefit others, and they desire the best for their people. The article concludes that great leaders are made, not born. As leaders make an effort to become successful in their profession, they should avoid resting on their laurels. They pass what they know to their people and desire the best for them.

Keywords: Leadership; personal growth; leaders' growth; strategies; a better leader

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Introduction

Are leaders made or born? Does a person have a natural talent to lead people, or does a person learn and grow to become an effective leader? These are common questions about leadership. According to [Maxwell and Hoskins \(2021\)](#) and [Collins and Lazier \(2020\)](#), great leaders, such as Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and Steve Jobs, all started from scratch as ordinary leaders, but they tried to work on themselves until they became great leaders. As Hungarian educational psychologist Laszlo Polgar once said, “A genius is not born, but is educated and trained.” ([Clear, 2018, p. 113](#)), and as Chinese philosopher Confucius said, “Good people strengthen themselves ceaselessly.” ([Sharma, 2020, p. 93](#))

[Maxwell \(2024\)](#) asserted that bad values and poor skills characterize bad leadership. Leaders lack skills because they stop learning and do not continuously improve themselves. As a result, they become incompetent, and people do not buy into their leadership style ([Kim & Mauborgne, 2017](#)). In some cases, many people are promoted to leadership positions higher than their current ability ([Peter & Hall, 2020](#)). It is called ‘The Peter Principle,’ meaning that employees tend to rise to their ‘level of incompetence.’ It is obvious that failing to master themselves and their craft causes employees and leaders to become victims of the Peter Principle.

The data from Gallup, a global analytics and advisory firm, showed that only 50% of the employees surveyed associated themselves with the work, while 20% deliberately disengaged themselves from their tasks ([Kim & Mauborgne, 2017](#)). The 20% group alone affected the US economy by approximately half a trillion dollars each year. According to the same source, poor leadership is the primary cause of this issue. However, [Kim and Mauborgne \(2017\)](#), who mention the survey above, explained that leaders are unintentional in being bad leaders. Their problem is the unawareness of bringing out the best in people. In other words, they are not skillful in getting their jobs done through their people.

Drawing on these disappointing results, we can tell that many leaders have one common problem concerning personal growth. People can become good leaders if they set a high goal to continuously learn and improve themselves. For years, leadership experts Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus conducted a study and uncovered that leaders set themselves apart from their followers due to

their ability to learn and improve themselves ceaselessly (Maxwell, 2022a). The natural talent of leaders may give them the edge in their leadership; however, relying heavily on it can deter their effectiveness (Maxwell, 2022a). To move up to a high level of leadership and reach their potential, leaders have to meticulously consider personal growth. They have to decide today to be the best learners in the room.

This article aims to discuss the relationship between leadership and personal growth. It first explains the benefits of personal growth to leaders, their employees, and their organization. Then, it highlights many practical ideas for leaders to develop themselves. Finally, the article concludes that becoming a great leader does not happen by default. Leaders need to learn and grow themselves ceaselessly in order to become great leaders whom many people want to follow.

The importance of leaders' personal growth

Embracing personal growth can make a major difference in leaders themselves, their followers, and, most of all, their organizations. The following are three key reasons why leaders' personal growth matters.

Leaders' growth empowers themselves

Few things in leaders' lives are more significant than deciding to be lifelong learners. As author Rich Warren advised, "The moment you stop learning is the moment you stop leading." (Maxwell, 2021, p. 108). As long as leaders are still in charge of their people and organizations, they have to keep learning. In the fast-changing world with advanced technology, organizations at present are in constant flux. Effective leaders set a life goal to become lifelong learners, and they desire to keep growing until their last breath (Maxwell, 2021). They get out of their comfort zone to challenge themselves, associate themselves with growth-minded people, and place themselves in a growth environment. As a result, their knowledge, skills, expertise, and wisdom propel them to pass their competitors by. Even when the pressure is on and the stakes are high, lifelong learning leaders can overcome roadblocks, beat the odds, break out of barriers, and keep themselves from falling off track. As philosopher Francis Bacon said, "Knowledge is power" (Maxwell, 2022a, p. 18). Good leaders empower themselves by becoming the best learners in the room.

Leaders' growth enriches their employees

A few months ago, I was invited to spend two days talking about becoming an outstanding student, self-improvement, and leadership to a group of youths and employees of the Buddhist Library Cambodia Project Organization located in Kampot province. The experience was indescribable. The youth and employees enjoyed their learning. From this experience, I began to realize that my progress from personal growth gives me the ability to grow others. When leaders make an effort to sharpen themselves, it also sheds light for them to enrich their people. How can it take place? First, throughout their personal growth, leaders can seize the opportunity to develop their people. Second, the Law of Magnetism in *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* by author John C. Maxwell states, "Who you are is who you attract." (Maxwell, 2022a, p. 109). When it comes to shaping the behavior of employees, leadership is caught more than taught. Telling employees to behave in a certain manner carries less weight than modeling them because people do what people see (Kouzes et al., 2017). According to Maxwell (2003), a person's attitude, good or bad, will be contagious to others in the work setting. If a leader at the top is not enthusiastic about learning and improving himself or herself, then people at the bottom will emulate this attitude. By contrast, when a leader is dedicated to personal growth, this attitude will spread like a disease to people throughout the organization. People, in return, will follow their leader's behavior and treat personal growth seriously. No employee wants to look foolish when their leader is known as a wise person.

Leaders' growth enlarges their organizations

A great organization is shaped and built by a great leader who leads top-notch team members. According to Maxwell (2022a), an organization's success never rises above its leader's effectiveness. If the leader's capability scores a 5 out of 10, then the organization's achievement will be at 4. On the other hand, when the leader moves up his or her leadership ability from a 5 to a 9, the same leader will uplift the organization's performance from a 4 to an 8. How well a leader leads determines his or her organization's level of success. Research by Collins (2001) showed that great companies, such as Gillette, Nucor, Walgreens, and Wells Fargo, were built by level-five leaders or great leaders and the right people or good team members. Moreover, a study by Goodall (2011) showed that having knowledgeable leaders can benefit organizations in many ways. For example, after physicians were appointed to lead hospitals, they could offer

better health care to patients. When leaders and employees improve and transform into a new version of themselves, there is no doubt that it enlarges their organizations (Maxwell, 2008). As management consultant Richard Barrett said, “Organizational transformation begins with the personal transformation of the leaders. Organizations don’t transform; people do!” (Maxwell & Hoskins, 2021, p. 126). In short, personal growth empowers leaders, enriches employees, and enlarges organizations.

A leader’s growth → employees’ growth → a better organization

Strategies for becoming a better leader

To raise their leadership challenge to the next level, leaders must meticulously embrace personal growth. Leaders who are passionate about improving themselves should keep these three elements in their minds: the right mindset, the right practice, and the right contribution. These are discussed below.

The right mindset

Mindset is a choice (Dweck, 2017). We can choose to become better people, parents, and employees. It also holds true in leadership. Our ability to lead people is not set in stone. We can learn and improve ourselves once we adopt the right mindset. The following are the three right mindsets for leaders: growth mindset, beginner mindset, and failing forward mindset.

Growth mindset

In her book, *Mindset*, psychologist Carol S. Dweck divided people’s mindsets into two distinct types: fixed and growth mindsets (Dweck, 2017). According to Dweck, a fixed mindset is the belief that our abilities, such as intelligence, emotion, character, personality, and interpersonal skills, *cannot* be developed and improved. Alternatively, a growth mindset is a belief that our abilities *can* be sharpened through our concerted efforts, strategies, and help from others. To become better leaders, we need to deeply believe that our leadership ability will improve through a growth mindset. For example, Dweck (2017) conducted an experiment on students’ mindsets toward the English language in Hong Kong. At the University of Hong Kong, classes are taught in English. Textbooks are written in English. Exams are in English. Almost everything must be in English. Therefore, students need to do something about it in a hurry. As soon as students registered for their freshman year, the faculty offered an English course for them to improve their English skills. The results showed that

students with fixed mindsets believed that they had a certain amount of intelligence, which could not do much to change it. Students who preached growth mindsets, on the other hand, believed that they could enhance their intelligence through learning.

Beginner mindset

Prideful leaders are self-centered and egotistic. They preach a mindset that if they are unable to do anything, others cannot, either. Sadly, their ego impedes their progress. As American journalist Sydney Harris said, “A winner knows how much he still has to learn, even when he is considered an expert by others; a loser wants to be considered an expert by others before he has learned enough to know how little he knows” (Maxwell, 2012, pp. 87–88). In contrast, good leaders realize that no matter how much they know, they still need room for improvement. They consider themselves beginners even though others call them experts. As American basketball coach John Wooden said, “It is what you learn after you know it all that counts.” (Goodreads, n.d.).

Failing forward mindset

Success and failure are not two separate objects. While many people are torn down and frustrated by failures, successful leaders have different perspectives. They realize that success is closely linked to failures, and it is impossible to be successful without failures. A study by leadership expert Warren Bennis with 70 of the top performers in various fields across the US indicated that these people view their mistakes as their “learning experiences,” “tuition paid,” “detours,” and “opportunities for growth.” (Maxwell, 2019). Table 1 below indicates that people view failures differently. When people fail backward, they cast blame on others, make the same mistakes, become victims, and want to quit. Alternatively, failing forward is the mindset of people who bear accountability for their lives, learn from their mistakes, maintain a positive attitude in the face of failures, and keep working on themselves.

Table 1. *People’s perspectives toward failures*

Failing Backward	Failing Forward
• Blaming Others • Repeating the Same Mistakes • Expecting Never to Fail Again	• Taking Responsibility • Learning from Each Mistake • Knowing Failure Is a Part of Progress

-
- | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| • Expecting to Continually Fail | • Maintaining a Positive Attitude |
| • Accepting Tradition Blindly | • Challenging Outdated Assumptions |
| • Being Limited by Past Mistakes | • Taking New Risks |
| • Thinking, I am a Failure | • Believing Something Didn't Work |
| • Quitting | • Persevering |
-

Source: [Maxwell \(2019, p. 71\)](#)

History proved that people needed to go through a number of failures before they became true winners. For example, according to [Ben-Shahar \(2021\)](#), inventor Thomas Edison had been working on a battery that could generate power from cells. He spent a great deal of time on this project, yet he failed ten thousand times. Then, a journalist came to interview him about the ongoing progress of his project. Thomas Edison replied, "I have not failed. I've just found ten thousand ways that won't work." Successful leaders always have a habit of reflecting, evaluating, and learning from their failures. They are capable of turning their pain into gain and failures into stepping stones. They fail early, fail often, and fail forward. If leaders want to enjoy success in the long run, they need to learn how to see failures as their best friends. As the former CEO of IBM observed, "If you want to increase your success rate, double your failure rate" ([Ben-Shahar, 2021, p. 130](#)).

The right practice

According to [Maxwell \(2022a\)](#), "Leadership develops daily, not in a day" (p. 27). Leadership development is a process rather than a destination. In this sense, before leaders associate themselves with the journey, they need to organize the proper blueprint and know the correct executions. Unawareness or a lack of the right practice can waste leaders' time, energy, and effort. More particularly, it can lead to demotivating leaders with little improvement. To become effective learners, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration.

Understand the phases of leadership development

The process of leadership development is different from person to person. Some people might start well when they are appointed to hold a leadership position, whereas others cannot lead even a team with a few members. However, according to [Maxwell \(2007\)](#), leadership development that occurs in most people might fall into the following five phases:

- A. *Phase 1: People do not know what they do not know.* Some people fail to recognize the value of leadership. They believe that leadership is for only the top people in organizations, or they will not learn leadership unless they become leaders. Knowing that leadership is about influencing people and can better their personal and professional lives might spark them to learn leadership. As long as people do not know what they do not know, they will not take action to grow.
- B. *Phase 2: People know that they need to know.* After people are appointed to lead others for a period of time and discover that only a few of their team members want to follow them, they might feel that they need to improve their leadership ability to stay in the game. This is the starting point in their leadership development.
- C. *Phase 3: People know what they do not know.* When people begin reading leadership books, listening to leadership podcasts, and attending leadership seminars, they realize their mistakes and notice their weaknesses. Then, they tell themselves that they need to correct themselves and develop their weaknesses so that they can get better results in their leadership.
- D. *Phase 4: People know and grow, and they see the results.* Few things can inspire people more than their sense of progress on a daily basis. When people discipline themselves to learn and grow, it starts to show them the results, making them continue their improvement. It ultimately becomes a circle of learning. People learn, then they grow, and finally, they see the results, making them repeat the process.
- E. *Phase 5: People simply do because of what they know.* The process of leadership development is similar to habit formation. When people repeatedly do an action, it will become automatic for them. They do not need to think about it before they act. The ways they lead people turn out to be easy and effective.

Be curious

People are born with curiosity about the world around them ([Ben-Shahar, 2021](#)), and curiosity is the key to becoming a lifelong learner. Curious leaders possess a thirst for knowledge. When they want to improve a skill, they will plunge into it wholeheartedly and stick to it. They adhere to the advice of American author Lillian Smith, “When you stop learning, stop listening, stop

looking and asking questions, always new questions, then it is time to die” (Ben-Shahar, 2021, p. 90). Asking questions and actively listening to the answers are the cornerstones of curiosity. It has been my observation that our curiosity will increase significantly when we come across a new topic we have an obsessive interest in. It can be called the ‘curiosity peak’.

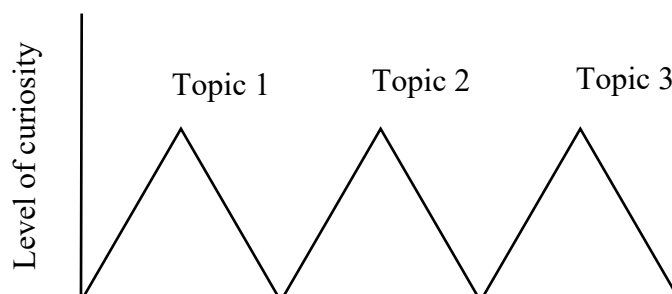


Figure 1. Curiosity peak

Source: Author

As illustrated in Figure 1, when we encounter a new topic of interest, the curiosity line increases dramatically. The passion for knowing this new topic keeps staying inside us until we take action to learn a vast majority of that topic. Once we come across another topic, we will repeat this behavior. Finally, this tendency will become a circle of curiosity for learning. As a result, our curiosity leads us to learn a variety of topics, making us become highly knowledgeable people and intellectuals.

Be like a sponge

When it comes to learning, people always possess one of these three attitudes. Arrogant attitude (I learn from nobody), Naïve attitude (I learn from only one person), and Teachable attitude (I learn from everyone) (Maxwell, 2012). Those who comply with a teachable attitude are like sponges. They acquire information and absorb knowledge from everyone they know. As Mengly J. Quach, the founder of Mengly J. Quach Education, said, “We can learn from everyone, including ourselves, family, friends, workers, farmers, businesspeople, motorcyclists, cyclo riders, scavengers, and garbage collectors.” (Quach, 2018, p. 319). Cohen and Levinthal (1990) called this attitude ‘absorptive capacity’. It refers to the ability to know, understand, and apply new information. It relies on two habits. First, are we reactive or proactive

to the new knowledge? Second, do we learn to fuel our growth or to feed our ego? (Ashford et al., 2003).

Table 2. *Absorptive capacity*

		FILTERING GOAL	
		<i>Ego</i>	<i>Growth</i>
ABSORBING APPROACH	<i>Reactive</i>	Rubber	Clay
	<i>Proactive</i>	Teflon	Sponge

Source: Grant (2023, p. 50)

Table 2 shows the association between the absorbing approach and the filtering goal. Reactive ego, reactive growth, and proactive ego are the attitudes leaders should not comply with. Leaders can be like sponges only when they are driven by proactive growth. They are optimistic with the new knowledge, and they learn to fuel their growth.

Target leadership skills

Effective leadership requires leaders to practice a variety of skills. Emotional strength, communication, problem-solving, people development, self-confidence, openness, empathy, adaptability, innovation, and planning are all the major components of good leadership. The fact is that no leader can do all of these skills well (Maxwell, 2022a). Therefore, what should leaders do? There are two solutions. First, leaders should select a few skills and take time to improve those areas before they jump into other ones. Ensure that the chosen skills align with their natural talent because leaders can learn better and grow faster in their sweet spots (Maxwell, 2018). Second, leaders should develop a leadership team (Maxwell, 2022a). When leaders realize their strengths and weaknesses, they can begin seeking team members whose skills can fill in their gaps.

Improve on character skills

As discussed above, leaders should select a few leadership skills for improvement and then dig deep into them. One significant area that leaders should not overlook is character skills. Mahatma Gandhi is often quoted as

saying, “A man of character will make himself worthy of any position he is given.” (Maxwell, 2024, p. 70). It is worthwhile to note that a strong character is built through a series of hardships. Moreover, solid character is a mark to predict a person’s future success. From their research, Chetty et al. (2011) could predict the salary of kindergarten students when growing up into their 20s. As indicated in Figure 2, those who learned with the more experienced teachers during their kindergarten classes would earn higher salaries than their peers when they became adults.

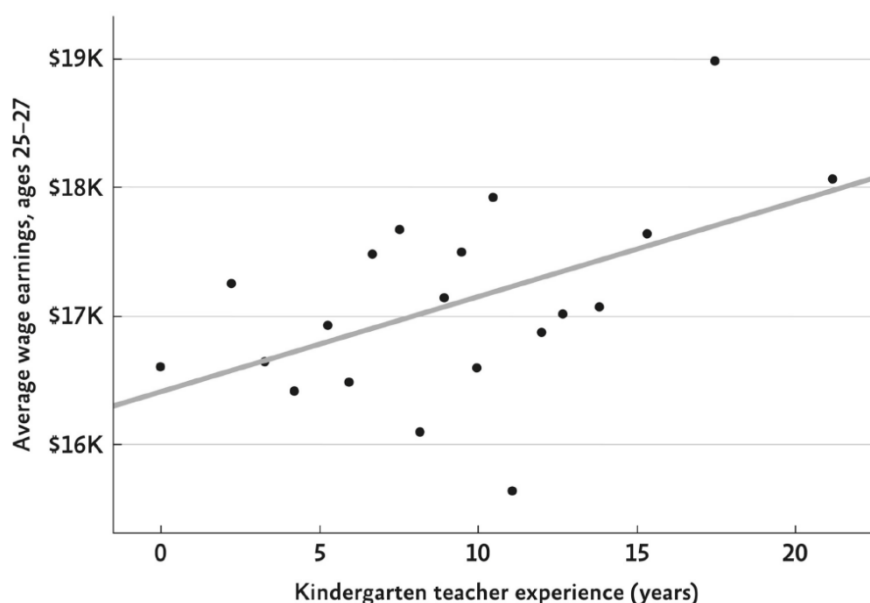


Figure 2. Effects of teacher experience on students’ income

Source: Chetty et al. (2011)

In the late 1800s, William James, known as the father of psychology, boldly claimed that people above 30 years old were *unable* to grow their character (Grant, 2023). However, new evidence showed that people can learn and develop their character skills even in their 30s, 40s, and 50s (Campos et al., 2017). Social scientists selected 1,500 entrepreneurs in West Africa. They put them into three different groups. In Group 1, the entrepreneurs went to run their businesses as normal. In Group 2, the entrepreneurs were trained in cognitive skills such as finance, accounting, HR, marketing, and pricing. Finally, the entrepreneurs from Group 3 were taught character skills, including proactivity, discipline, and determination. After two years, the result showed that the entrepreneurs in group 3 could accumulate their firms’ profits by an average of 30 percent, approximately triple the benefit of entrepreneurs in

group 2. In short, leaders should not take character skills for granted. They should select at least one or two character skills and constantly sharpen them.

Be comfortable with discomfort

Very often, when people leave their comfort zones, they feel insecure and nervous. Being comfortable with discomfort occurs when people try to learn or do novel things that make them uncomfortable initially. However, after going through them long enough, they begin to get used to them and become comfortable. In the 1970s, research on learning styles started to blossom in education across many countries. Learning styles are the ways students acquire knowledge and retain information through their best learning behavior. This means auditory learners learn best by hearing; visual learners must see the images, and verbal learners must read and write (Grant, 2023). In this regard, Peter Drucker, known as the father of modern management, supported learning styles and criticized the educational system, as follows: As noted by Drucker

Schools everywhere are organized on the assumption that there is only one right way to learn and that it is the same way for everybody. But to be forced to learn the ways a school teaches is sheer hell for students who learn differently. Indeed, there are probably half a dozen different ways to learn. (Harvard Business Review, 2011, p. 49)

According to Grant (2023), getting comfortable with discomfort is sometimes a good way to learn. In other words, when we feel uncomfortable with one learning style, we will work harder, leading us to significant growth. Getting comfortable with discomfort is the opposite of learning styles. Instead of finding a comfortable way to learn, we seek the discomfort and try to overcome it. For example, I am a verbal learner. Two-thirds of my knowledge results from reading. Then, I deliberately shifted my learning style from reading books to listening to podcasts. The result: I had to work harder than reading. I needed to pay painstaking attention to the speakers' voices, thoroughly follow the stories, and replay the videos multiple times to grasp meanings. Being uncomfortable at listening helped me pronounce additional words properly, improved my intuitive thinking, and increased my focus. Professor Betty Bender was right when he said, "Anything I've ever done that ultimately was worthwhile... initially scared me to death." (Maxwell, 2024, p. 113)

Partner with growth-minded people

In science, it is logical when one plus one equals two. However, when it comes to teamwork or partnership, one plus one can equate to more than two. In reality, research confirmed this tendency is correct. A champion-caliber horse alone, for example, has the energy to pull a sled of 4,500 pounds. Once we pair this horse with another one, they both could pull a sled weighing up to 12,000 pounds (Maxwell & Hoskins, 2021). Furthermore, the partnership principle can double or even triple productivity in many aspects. For example, when geese gather to fly together in formation, it allows the entire flock to fly 71 percent further than the solo goose (Covey, 1998). The outcome of these research studies is right for both animals and humans. Evidence showed that spending time learning with other knowledgeable people elevates growth (Grant, 2023). In US intelligence agencies, the best predictor for a productive team is how often its members teach and coach one another. It is called the 'tutor effect' in psychological terms (Grant, 2023). As an African remarked, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." (Maxwell & Hoskins, 2021, p. 84).

Learn to become a reader

President Harry S. Truman reputedly said, "Not all readers become leaders, but all leaders must be readers." (Maxwell, 2023, p. 231). Reading can benefit leaders in many ways. It can expand their knowledge, enhance their critical thinking, and make them more creative and intelligent (Grant, 2023; Quach, 2018). Among the four macro skills in education, leaders can choose to obtain knowledge through listening and reading. However, reading seems better than listening. First, most documents were recorded on paper. Second, reading improves people's critical thinking and comprehension more than listening. In one experiment by Daniel and Woody (2010), the experimenters conducted a study by assigning students to go through a science article for 20 minutes. Half of the students were randomly required to listen to the article; the other half were assigned to read it. Two days later, all the students were quizzed about the article. The result exposed that the listeners scored 59%, whereas the readers could score 81%. When it comes to critical thinking, there is no substitute for reading. Moreover, according to Tracy and Chee (2013), if people spend considerable time reading daily, it will translate into about one book a week or about 50 books a year. This means that reading 30–60 minutes consistently over three, five, or ten years will give people a wealth of knowledge. If leaders want

to absorb knowledge broadly and dramatically, they should engage themselves with reading.

Design an effective system for improvement

Michael Gerber, the author of *The E-Myth*, asserted, “Systems permit ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results predictably. However, without a system, even extraordinary people find it difficult to predictably achieve even ordinary results” (Maxwell, 2022b, p. 109). My personal experience supports his statement. In fact, I have had a system for my personal development, another system for reading books, and another system for writing articles and books. For years, these systems have helped me beyond my expectations.

To grow themselves effectively, leaders need to be intentional, strategic, and systematic. The following are some ideas for developing a system for improvement.

- A. *Set the routine for learning:* Best-selling author Ryan Holiday explained that routine refers to things people do in an orderly way, but they sometimes need to be flexible with their routine (Skipper, 2024). What is the best time for our learning? Are we morning or night people? For me, I am a morning person, a reader, and a writer. Every day, I get up early before sunrise. It is my productive time because I feel fresh and energized. I read, think, and write. Robin Sharma, author of *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, advised people to participate in the 5 AM Club, which was later expanded into a book entitled *The 5 AM Club*. He developed a practical 20/20/20 formula, which means that we spend the first 20 minutes exercising, the middle 20 minutes thinking, and the last 20 minutes learning (Sharma, 2019). We need to learn in the morning because it is the habit of most productive and successful people and is grounded in many studies. In addition, we can consider our daily routine as the year’s four seasons (Maxwell, 2024).

Morning is spring: It is a good time for learning, reflecting, or writing.

Afternoon is autumn: It is the time to meet people, have a meeting, and make phone calls.

Evening is summer: Like farmers who work on their land, we can get out for business.

Night is winter: It is the time we cannot do much work, so we sleep.

Maxwell (2012, p. 89) recommended a weekly conceptual plan for leadership development as follows:

Monday: Spend one hour with a devotional to develop your spiritual life.

Tuesday: Spend one hour listening to a leadership podcast or audio lesson.

Wednesday: Spend one hour filing quotes and reflecting on the content of Tuesday's tape.

Thursday: Spend one hour reading a book on leadership.

Friday: Spend half the hour reading the book and the other half filing and reflecting.

- B. *Insert deliberate play to prevent burnout:* As a lifelong learner and a teacher, I always seek effective learning methods for myself and my students. For example, using index cards for learning new words is one good way I have introduced to my students. I have been fortunate to encounter these two practices for improvement: deliberate practice and deliberate play.

First, deliberate practice is a way of improving performance through repetition of the task based on tangible goals and sudden feedback (Macnamara et al., 2014). A study by psychologist Anders Ericsson uncovered that it took a person 10,000 hours of deliberate practice to become a real expert in his or her field (Grant, 2013). Furthermore, this number varies from person to person (Grant, 2023). Some might need less than 10,000 hours, while others need more than this number. However, the negative consequence of deliberate practice is that the trainees could put themselves at risk for burnout and boreout. Burnout occurs when people have an overloaded workload on their shoulders, causing them to have emotional exhaustion. Boreout, on the other hand, is a psychological term, meaning trainees experience emotional deadening when they lose interest in their training.

Second, deliberate play is a structured activity designed to merge skill development and play together (Côté, 1999). The purpose of deliberate play is to make people have fun and master their skills simultaneously.

More importantly, deliberate play can prevent trainees from burnout and boreout. An experiment by [Grant et al. \(2014\)](#) showed that injecting a bit of deliberate play when healthcare professionals were stressed helped reduce their burnout. Deliberate play involves novelty and various activities for practice and training. It can be the way of learning, the tools of training, and the people we interact with. It ranges from a game, a role-play, or an exercise. It is a useful strategy for self-improvement.

- C. *Extract important lessons and file them for future use:* The 80/20 rule states that 20 percent of the books contain 80 percent of the content ([Maxwell, 2018](#)). This rule is also true for podcasts and seminars. As learners, leaders' jobs are to bring out significant points from the books they read, the podcasts they listen to, and the workshops they attend. As shown in Table 3, when I read a book, I always use these codes for insightful quotes, new lessons, practical ideas, interesting or funny stories, research studies, and sentences or paragraphs that motivate me.

Table 3. *Codes for noting key points when reading books*

Code	Word
Q	Quote
L	Lesson
I	Idea
S	Story
R	Research
EN	Encouragement

Source: Author

After reading, I can come back and start to file them. I jot down good quotes on index cards and put them by subjects such as creativity, problem-solving, empowerment, character, goals, and so on. I also write down the lessons, ideas, stories, and research studies with the page numbers next to them on four papers and then keep them in the book. When I am in need of ideas for writing an article, it takes me no more than five minutes to scan for them. Effective learners recognize that

resources contain little significance unless they can extract useful and valuable information.

D. *Apply ideas in real situations*: It is worthwhile to notice that knowledge alone is never enough. Leaders need to practice ideas in any possible setting. As the father of modern management, Peter Drucker advised, “Don’t tell me you enjoyed this; tell me what you will do differently on Monday morning.” (Drucker & Maciariello, 2004, p. xiii). Growth means change, and actions have to precede change. Leaders need to apply their knowledge to gain firsthand experience. Both knowledge and experience must go together. They are like two wings of a plane. Losing one wing will impede leaders from reaching their potential. At age 85, the greatest cellist, Pablo Casals, was asked by a reporter, “Why do you still practice for five hours every day?” Casals smiled and said, “I think I am getting better” (Osteen, 2015, p. 142). Following Pablo Casals’s attitude of continuous learning and strengthening the craft ceaselessly will bring leaders to a higher benchmark for their leadership journey.

The right contribution

Motivational speaker Zig Ziglar is often quoted as saying, “If you help people get what they want, they will help you get what you want.” (Maxwell, 2018, p. 145). The founding father of the United States, Benjamin Franklin, regularly asked himself this question in the morning, “What good shall I do today?” and he asked another question in the evening, “What good have I done today?” (Maxwell, 2022b, p. 244). Franklin often found rationales to help and share with other people. He saw the world in terms of how much he could give and how many people he could serve. Good leaders adopt and follow Franklin’s servant attitude by passing it on to others and desiring the best for their people.

Pass it on to other people

As discussed above, being a sponge is one great way for leaders to acquire knowledge and absorb information. Nonetheless, sea sponges have an exceptional capacity to not only soak up everything but also create and release something to benefit other creatures (Grant, 2023). Sea sponges can produce biochemicals that protect lives with anticancer, antibacterial, antiviral, and anti-inflammatory properties (Olson, 2019). Substances from Caribbean Sea sponges cause the discovery of the cure for HIV, herpes, and leukemia. Areas from Japanese sea sponges have been invented into a chemotherapy drug that can

extend the lives of women with severe breast cancer. Finally, a peptide from an Antarctic Sea sponge gives promising leads to the treatment of malaria.

Like sea sponges, when leaders begin leading people, they try to find possible ways to be successful in their jobs as leaders. Once they become successful, good leaders never rest on their laurels. They find their greatest reward by passing their knowledge, wisdom, experience, and expertise on to others. They build a ladder for others and bring them to the top together because they believe everyone has great potential to become a good leader.

Desire the best for their people

Author and philosopher Albert Schweitzer once remarked, “I don’t know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve” (Maxwell, 2024, p. 224). Our world will become a better place if there are more leaders like Schweitzer because they desire the best for others. In his 2024 book, *High Road Leadership*, John C. Maxwell classified leaders into three distinct types (Maxwell, 2024).

- Low-road leaders desire the best for themselves.
- Middle-road leaders desire fairness between themselves and their people.
- High-road leaders desire the best for others.

Becoming leaders does not mean we get the opportunity to gain power, sit in a cozy office, impress people, and fulfill our ambitions. This leadership is known as shallow leadership, meaning that leaders lead for the sake of personal gain (Maxwell, 2022a). Great leadership is about the impact leaders make on the world around them, the people they work with, and the results they produce together (Harvard Business Review, 2015). Great leaders seek to make a difference in people’s lives. They help people reach their potential, add value to people, serve people, and desire the best for people.

Conclusion

Leadership is about influencing people. Effective leaders are capable of making visions into reality. Leaders can increase their influence by going up from the low level to the high level of their leadership. Good leaders are lifelong learners,

and their continuous improvement drives them to empower themselves, enrich their people, and enlarge their organizations.

Great leaders are made, not born. No leaders become great by default. Everyone needs to start from scratch as a beginner; however, leadership is learnable. With the right practices, constant motivation, high commitment, and the help of others, people can learn and grow to become good or great leaders. Preaching the right mindset, carrying on the right practice, and adopting the right contribution are vital elements of leadership development.

To bring their leadership to a higher benchmark, leaders should shift their focus from success to significance. Success is what leaders do for themselves, whereas significance is what they do for their people. Great leaders are like rivers, not reservoirs. They receive water and pass it on to others, and they desire the best for their people.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express his gratitude to Dr. Kimkong Heng, Editor-in-Chief of the *Cambodian Journal of Educational Research*, for his constructive feedback and edits. The author also wishes to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier version of this article.

Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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