



Professional Development

A Fresh Look

What are we developing, and why? We must always keep this question at the forefront in every professional development intervention.

There are at least two lenses through which people look at such engagements:

1. We are either fixing something broken, such as “get that executive, or manager, some help before we fire him/her.”
2. Or, we are investing in high potential leaders who we want to keep happy, well fed, and in condition to beat the competition.

Either way, with this initial inquiry, we are lead to have to confront the hidden or not so hidden assumptions driving the intervention. Many of the executives with whom we have been tasked with ‘developing’ hear unspoken messages in the background akin to: “something is wrong with you,” or “in some way you are not enough as you are.”

In our culture, many of us have grown up on a steady diet of making things better, improving performance, enhancing effectiveness and dreaming for a better way or a better life – what is commonly known as the American Dream. This endless quest for improvement is internalized, and we hold the message almost as gospel, that it is good and necessary. But there is a way in which someone being developed can end up feeling less than and inadequate, without being clear why, as if there was a sleeping giant beneath all the action. This does not feel good and can even be perilous.

Inside of this paradox that there is nothing to “fix” in someone, yet professional development is required, we have created underlying assumptions within which we operate that are critical to the work of professional development as we see it.

1. ***You are enough exactly how you are right now.*** No improvement necessary. Your organization has enough resource, enough brains, enough passion to pull off what it wants ALREADY. You already do enough every single day. Getting *more done* will not improve anybody’s anything.
2. ***Growth in the service of your mission or your greatness or your organization's success is fine if you are starting from an organizing principle of what we call in our work, 'exquisite sufficiency,'*** which is the context for #1 above and essentially says everything is already alright. (Click [here](#) for a robust discussion into exquisite sufficiency on the [Seven Stones Leadership website](#).)

3. ***Having a clear purpose for your development efforts*** – ‘for the sake of what’ – will serve to quell the screaming voices of [scarcity](#) that may lurk just beneath the surface.

The above operating assumptions shift the work of professional development in several significant ways. Most importantly, the investment – of time, budget and attention – is more effective. Development actually happens. The team and the organization feel the benefits. This is because the recipient is more likely to own the work when they aren’t feeling bad. So what can often feel intrusive at best and oppressive at worst is now a process the person is deeply engaged in, excited about. The work is crafted inside a context that goes far beyond pleasing the boss, enhancing the review, fighting for the job or even improving the company bottom line. These are not bad reasons in and of themselves, indeed sometimes necessary. We find, however, that alone they will not ignite people’s passion or heart or willingness to be vulnerable, which is the only way people “develop”.

Starting from lack tends to breed more lack, which can sometimes express as overcompensation. Either way swinging on the monkey bars of this polarity of lack and excess tends to produce a bit of behavior modification but not the lasting, deeper shifts that a person can carry with them for a lifetime, and bring with confidence to their organization. As we come up against the limits of the current scarcity model to create a world that sustains seven billion human inhabitants, we see that we have also reached the limits of a traditional model of personal development to spark and drive cutting edge leadership.

Work with the following questions to begin thinking in this new way: ***What shifts in our approach to professional development ...***

- If we move from an assumption that something needs to be fixed or grown, to an assumption that we are whole and complete as we are and can always learn and develop the human spirit?
- If we have reached the limits of growth as a model for economic development as well as the development of human beings?
- If we stopped trying to be somewhere different than where we are because “over there” is better than over here?
- If we are not trying to outsmart the competition to survive and be on top but rather cultivate nimble, agile leaders who can innovate in turbulent waters and collaborate across industries?

Here is to developing the human spirit, cultivating the human heart and igniting the passionate mind to lead us all well.