



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Take Charge of Your Success— Embrace Personal Development

by Lisa Bull

Most of us would acknowledge that to achieve success and advance our careers, we must acquire new skills, increase our core competencies and adapt to an ever-changing industry. In short, we must learn, grow and evolve. Yet many of us may not place the same significance on developing our skills in dealing with people, forming healthy habits, increasing our self-discipline, practicing goal setting, establishing effective time management, enhancing our parenting abilities, reflecting on our spiritual growth, refining long-established thought patterns and so on.

Too many of us still view our professional development as separate from our personal development. Perhaps that's because personal growth remains a subject not openly discussed around the water cooler. And why not? Perhaps personal development, for many, conjures images of cheesy self-help books, CDs full of self-affirmations, rah-rah motivational seminars—you know, pledge week on public television.

Such an attitude would be of no consequence except for one truth—where you will be in five years is entirely a result of the books you read and the people with whom you associate. While there are many tools we can use to craft our own personal development plan, this article will focus on the two most influential—reading and association.

Association

Don't believe it? Think back to your teenage years. Did your parents caution you against hanging around with the wrong crowd (their definition, of course)? Why? Because if you spent time with people headed in the wrong direction, there's a good chance you'd assimilate those negative influences and fall into unhealthy, destructive habits yourself.

So at what age does that stop being true? Twenty-five? Thirty-five? Maybe 55? Or,

maybe never. If that's the case—that we will continue to be influenced by those we surround ourselves with—then perhaps we should choose our “associates” (those with whom we associate) carefully. The reality, however, is that many of us don't “choose” at all. We wind up hanging out with co-workers, neighbors, family members, club members, etc., because they're easily accessible...or we're expected to do so. We let convenience, not conscious choice, drive one of two key determinants to our success.

Think about an individual you spend time with frequently. How do you come away from that time together? Do you feel energized, inspired, thoughtful, happy, apathetic, irritated, depressed? Take a moment to reflect on this question about other “associates.” Seeing any patterns emerge?

Hopefully, you perceive those influences to be encouraging, rewarding, challenging (in a positive sense), and as pulling you toward the person you want to become. If you don't feel that way, consider why and how you'll seek out different influences.

The Critical Role of Mentors

In a recent conversation with a rising star of a leading consulting organization, I asked him to what he attributed his success. Without thinking, he immediately replied, “the mentors I've been able to tap.” He quickly listed five individuals as comprising his “mastermind group” (Napoleon Hill's term) or “inner circle” (John Maxwell's term)—and they differed in their areas of expertise, place within the organization, depth/absence of actuarial accreditation, life experience, age and personality style. This is a good recipe for success.

The problem with the whole concept of mentoring is that it requires humility. And humility is a quality seen too often as a weakness, not strength. The best leaders were excellent followers at some point, yet it seems we forget this.

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You may wish to reflect on a past success of your own. How did you achieve it? Was it 100 percent a result of your smarts, creativity and execution—devoid of any external influence? Odds are, you had some input along the way that positioned you for that success. Knowing this, let's get smart about how to cultivate the best possible influence.

Find a Mentor

If the goal of having a mentor is to provide you insight that you don't possess, it makes sense that you'll be best served by drawing on very different individuals from both professional and personal areas of your life. The following questions may assist you in your selection(s):

Is he/she where I want to be in their quality of relationships, financial resources/security, professional expertise, zest for life?

Does he/she have a vested interest in my success? (Not necessarily financial...your mentor's "vested interest" may be the personal satisfaction he/she will feel by helping you achieve your potential.)

Has he/she mentored others? If so, to what result? (Note that your evaluation should consider that not all proteges reach success, and this fact may have much less to do with the efficacy of the mentor than the desire and follow-through of the mentored.) And finally, do I trust him/her and will he/she trust me?

If you truly believe this individual is "qualified" to lead you and will put your interests first, then embrace what you learn. The best mentors are willing to tell us what we don't want to hear, when we don't want to hear it. If you find yourself in that situation, you can trust you have a person in your life who places your personal development above the friendship he/she has with you. You can't ask for a greater commitment.

Moving On—Addressing Poor Association

Allow your mentor(s) to provide insight that you cannot provide for yourself, including perspective on the people with whom you're surrounding yourself. Now the tough part comes. What if you'd be better served by not spending time with your spouse's mother—whom

he/she adores and lives across the street? No easy formula. You may wish to ease into this by talking openly with your spouse about how you feel and the ultimate result you're committed to accomplishing (which is probably not to offend or hurt the individual's feelings).

We're not talking about cutting "cold-turkey" all contact with such an individual. Depending on the degree of negativity, however, you may conclude that that's the right way to go. I've been there a couple times myself—it's not easy, but it was 100 percent the right thing to do. But come to think of it, how often in your life have the easy decisions proven to be the best decisions over time?

The Books We Read

Successful people are readers. The books they read, by the way, aren't the latest fiction offerings; rather, you'll find successful people reading titles covering:

- Biographies and autobiographies of current or historical leaders
- Motivation
- Psychology
- Selling skills
- Management philosophy
- Time management
- Good health and nutrition
- Relationships
- Personality profiles
- Spiritual topics
- Wealth building
- Historical events

At a recent actuarial club meeting, a candidate who was making good progress in his firm—getting tapped for key projects and receiving recognition for his results—questioned me if the "leaders are readers" thought was for real. I encouraged him to simply ask his boss, highly respected in the organization, "What are you reading now?" Though he felt his boss wouldn't understand the

Success Magazine interviewed 75,000 people between 1991-1997. What emerged is a stunning demonstration of how embracing personal development results in personal and professional success. The survey defined "success" as an individual with the following three characteristics:

- In a loving and permanent relationship;
- Enjoys what he/she does for a living;
- And has liquid assets of \$1 million or more.



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question (coming out of nowhere), he asked anyway. His boss replied readily, describing with enthusiasm a nonfiction history genre about which he had spent a lot of time over the last several months exploring. This candidate was utterly surprised to see the point proven.

So Many Books, So Little Time

So where to start? Of course, the best resource to tap is your mentor(s). He/she knows you best and can steer you to a book appropriate for where you are today. If you don't have a mentoring relationship already established, consider approaching a highly respected executive within your organization. It's unfortunate that people often perceive successful people as too busy and too important to "condescend" to speak with someone less important, less strategic. That couldn't be further from the truth.

Successful people will always take the time to meet with an individual seeking to improve his/her own performance.

The caveat is that you must seek them out. By definition, they are busy. In addition, they recognize that only a small percentage of people are truly looking to enhance their personal development. That's a critical fact if you consider when you last received unsolicited advice from someone. Did you take it? Did you even really give it much reflection? Successful people can't waste precious time and energy where there's a poor ROI. Approach these people with sincerity and enthusiasm and see what happens.

You'll find a recommended reading list at the end of this article (a sampling of books I've personally read and would highly recommend). A comprehensive list would be unwieldy, if not

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Personal Development Pitfall

Here's an example of the pitfalls of not embracing one's own personal development: A candidate we placed had everything going for him—rapid exam progress, promotions, involvement in strategic projects, recognition and, ability to work effectively with internal and external customers. He interviewed with an intensely fast-paced, high-expectations team and got the job. Since he's been with the new organization, he's had some struggles to make the transition—even though he was confident he'd slide right in with a minimum ramp-up, and even though the employer was up front with this candidate that he had a number of deficiencies in his skill set to address before he could really leverage his potential (I call it "Swiss cheese" knowledge).

He'd learned enough in his career to make solid impressions in particular situations, but outside those experiences his foundation of knowledge wasn't broad enough to accurately and effectively deal with new situations he was encountering. Even so, he's received a promotion to recognize where he has added value.

The problem is not his skills deficit, but his reaction. Instead of being open to "backfilling" a bit on some technical pieces, he's found himself frustrated and irritated. He feels like he's not getting the strategic exposure he had been getting previously because he refuses to see the value in stepping back in a sense to take a giant step forward.

The truly unfortunate part is that if he does not embrace personal development now—clearly, this is more than technical stuff, like attitude, motivation, people skills, goal setting—this candidate will encounter this same road block at the next employer, and the next, and so on.

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impossible to compile. A great starting place is with *The Magic of Thinking Big* by David Schwartz. If it strikes you as hokey, I challenge you to give it a read. (If you can honestly say after reading it in its entirety that it was a complete waste, please contact me because it'd be of interest for me to understand why.)

But I Hate To Read!

Isn't that how many of us feel? Let's look at the results created by an unwillingness to simply read 10-15 minutes a day in a positive book:

- How much did you learn about yourself today?
- How much did you learn about how to more effectively communicate with others (beyond "I talked, he listened")?
- How motivated do you feel to achieve your goals?
- Have you even set any goals?
- Did you confront any situation today that made you feel uncomfortable/angry/fearful?
- Are you any more prepared than you were today to confidently and appropriately handle that situation in the future so all parties involved feel a win-win?

You get the idea. If nothing changes, nothing changes. Put yourself in a position to succeed. Avail yourself of tools to improve your chance of identifying and achieving your own potential.

Your choice

The wrap-up here is that it's all about you. You get to choose.

How do you define success? What do you want? What are you willing to do to journey toward that definition? Keep in mind that wherever you draw the line—I won't read/get a mentor/redefine my "associates"/listen to a motivational CD program/attend a seminar/turn off the TV sooner/and so on—is where your success stops. Don't negotiate with your success. Decide what the prize is, calculate the price, then pay it.

You can be strong-armed into attending professional development forums. Employers have the carrot or stick required to force your participation. If that's your situation, it's regrettable because you and your employer will be disappointed by the results.

Recognize, however, that no one can force you to embrace your own personal development. Should you choose to do so, you will take charge of your success.

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Results	Successful Person	Average Person
Books	Reads 1.5 hours per day Reads 3 books per month 75 percent of books read are nonfiction	Reads 2 minutes per day Reads 1 book every 20 months Reads 1 nonfiction book every 5-6 years
TV	Watches 2 hours per week	Watches 3 hours per day
Tapes/ CD Programs	Purchases 3-4 programs per year	Purchases 1 program every 5-7 years
Seminars	Attends 3-5 per year	Attends 1 every 3-5 years

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Recommended Reading List

The Magic of Thinking Big by David J. Schwartz (1959 Prentice-Hall, Inc., New York, NY)

How To Get Rich by Donald J. Trump (2004 Random House, NY)

The 21 Success Secrets of Self-Made Millionaires by Brian Tracy (2001 Executive Books, Mechanicsburg, PA)

How to Win Friends and Influence People by Dale Carnegie [Original Copyright 1936] Pocket Books, New York, NY)

Seeds of Greatness by Denis Waitley (1983 Pocket Books, New York, NY)

Failing Forward by John C. Maxwell (2000 Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN)

The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership by John C. Maxwell (1998 Thomas Nelson Publishers, Nashville, TN)

The Power of Positive Thinking by Norman Vincent Peale (1990 Doubleday, New York, NY)

Success Is a Choice by Rick Pitino (1997 Broadway Books, New York, NY)

A Few Keys to All Success by Jim Muncy (2002 Few Keys, Valdosta, GA)

The Instant Millionaire by Mark Fisher (1990 New World Library, Novato, CA)

Benjamin Franklin by Edmund S. Morgan (2002 Yale University Press, New Haven, CT)

Grinding It Out by Ray Kroc (1977 St. Martin's Press, New York, NY)

Sam Walton—Made in America by Sam Walton (1993 Bantam Books, New York, NY)

The Long Walk by Slavodmir Rawicz (1997 The Lyons Press, Guilford, CT)

Frozen Footprints by Alicia Gilewicz (1998 INTI Publishing, Tampa, FL)

The Seven Spiritual Laws for Parents by Deepak Chopra (1997 Harmony Books, New York, NY)

Rich Kid, Smart Kid by Robert Kiyosaki

Awaken the Giant Within by Anthony Robbins (A Fireside Book, New York, NY)

The Four Agreements by Don Miguel Ruiz (1997 Amerg-Allen Publishing, Inc., San-Raphael, CA)

Way of the Peaceful Warrior by Dan Millman (1980 H.J. Kramer, Inc., Tiburon, CA)

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What you do, how you do it and who you know are all important

On "American Idol" it's not just singing and dancing, it's also about stage presence, personality and fan base.

At work, It's not just about computing and analyzing, it's also working with others, presentation skills, networking and seeing the big picture. Realize it is important for you to work on all of these. Unfortunately, just being smart isn't enough.

In the end you have to perform

Just ask John Stevens—being 16 and having red hair can get you only so far!

It takes the whole package to be successful—actuarial skills, people skills, business savvy and a performance orientation. There really is no way to "Succeed in Business Without Really Trying."

Have fun, do your best, enjoy the journey

A final word of advice, actuaries have great jobs, enjoy yours, have fun and do your best. □