



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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Your Plan for Leadership Growth

By Brian Pauley



Brian Pauley, FSA, MAAA, is an actuary with a passion for leadership and personal development. He can be reached at bepauley@gmail.com.

“Failing to plan is planning to fail.”—John Wooden

As a reader of *The Stepping Stone*, I have a question for you: What is your plan for growing as a leader? Here is why I ask:

If your job as a leader is to make others better, how can that happen if you are not actively making yourself better?

You likely do things each day to become a better actuary. You read industry publications, talk to co-workers about technical issues, attend one of the many great Society of Actuaries (SOA) meetings each year, etc. These are essential, wonderful things. But, if you *lead*, why shouldn't you also develop yourself as a leader? If you desire to be effective, you should. Perhaps you believe that by performing typical day-to-day management activities such as running meetings, steering projects, etc., you are actively *growing* as a leader. You are not.

Like any improvement journey, getting better requires an *intentional* plan to get to a defined place you desire to reach. We can apply the importance of intentionality to many situations. But, I want to specifically encourage this for your leadership growth. If you are reading this, chances are you value your growth as a leader. And, since you value that, it pays to be intentional about it. In *The 15 Invaluable Laws of Growth*, author and speaker John Maxwell wrote in detail about what he calls the Law of Intentionality. Simply put, the law states: *“Growth doesn't just happen.”*

There are endless possibilities to consider implementing into your leadership growth plan. But, if you are looking for ideas to get one started or to bolster the one you already have, I offer these suggestions.

1) READ A LEADERSHIP BLOG OR ARTICLE EACH WEEK

The accessibility of the Internet makes finding and reading blogs on the topic of growth and leadership

very easy. And, they are free. So, consider this a low-hanging-fruit recommendation.

One caution I have is to not read too many. It is easy to get sucked into subscribing to tons of these. Start with one that hits home with you and go from there. I personally have four that I read each week. I've had many more in the past, but have trimmed it down to the essential ones I can consume each week. Quality is more important than quantity here. And, quality is defined by what you are looking for and your capacity to consume and implement what you read.

2) READ ONE LEADERSHIP BOOK A MONTH

Books are a great way to grow in your leadership. Go to any online or brick-and-mortar bookstore and the options are endless. Books are the textbooks of your leadership growth journey. I recommend keeping a list of books and considering the below criteria as part of your selections:

- **Fundamentals**—Books written by the top thinkers in leadership development, past and present.
- **Targeted selections**—Books written about particular areas you are working to grow in (e.g., mentoring).
- **Recommendations**—You would be wise to surround yourself with people who are also growing in their leadership. Ask them for their recommendations. What books have they read that had a big impact on them? What are they reading right now?
- **Outside the box**—To grow, you must expand your exposure and thinking. So, consider reading something outside your normal realm. For example, as an actuary, read a book about marketing. Leaders at the top of their profession certainly must be broader than the trade that got them there.

I am specifically recommending that you read one book per month. I've heard stories of people reading one book every one or two weeks. When you factor in the time required to digest the material, to apply it to your work, and to practice it, reading more than one book per month is a lot. On the other hand, leadership growth is a discipline. I think one book per month is the right pace for most individuals.

3) ATTEND A GROWTH EVENT OR CONFERENCE EACH YEAR (BEYOND YOUR USUAL SOA CONFERENCE)

This gets you away from the office, away from your industry, and away from those who likely think like you do. Whenever I have gone to leadership development events, I have always been struck by just how different other industries are, the variety of challenges people face, and the common bond that a hunger for growth fosters.

Be open and creative here. Several years ago, I accidentally happened upon a health supplement conference where University of Kentucky men's basketball coach, John Calipari, was speaking, and John Maxwell was giving a workshop right in my hometown. After doing some research, I discovered that registration was open to the public and only cost \$130. Not only did I learn a lot from the speech and the workshop, but an actuary hanging out with a few thousand health supplement salespeople was a growth experience in and of itself! Be willing to expand in these ways.

One more thing—your employer not funding such events is no excuse. You must be willing to invest in your growth. In fact, motivational speaker and *Success Magazine* publisher, Darren Hardy, advises that people should invest 10 percent of what they earn into their growth.

4) ESTABLISH A MENTOR TO HELP YOU GROW YOUR LEADERSHIP

This entire magazine could be devoted to mentoring. For the sake of this article though, there is one thing I want to emphasize about mentoring. *Don't just randomly select someone in the office who has a higher position than you.* A mentor must be someone willing and able to help you grow in

the areas in which you want to grow. A mentor is only as good for you as his/her ability to guide and challenge you on your specific plan.

Start with one person. Over time, as your appetite for growth gains momentum and you set many such goals, you can expand out to multiple mentors, each focused on helping you with the particular goals you are working on. They will likely change over time, but with some growing into deep friendships and permanent relationships. In the long run, you could end up with an "inner circle" in addition to serving as mentors to others seeking their own leadership growth. This is a great thing!

5) KEEP A JOURNAL

As you engage in a leadership growth plan, you will read a lot, have many conversations, ask a lot of questions, etc. Leadership is not a spectator sport. You must get your hands dirty, wrestle with the concepts, and do much thinking. This is where a journal will prove beneficial. Here, you will take notes, jot down questions, review what you have learned, flesh out your thoughts, etc.

Someone once approached me and said, "I think it is pointless to read leadership books. Just because you read a book, doesn't mean you are a better leader." Knowing I was an advocate of doing such reading, he was surprised to find that I mostly agreed with him. Simply reading a book does not make you better. It would seem silly to read a book about golf and expect to go out and play great golf. Books merely give you things to take out onto the course. The best leaders read a lot, think a lot, write a lot, seek mentorship, and intentionally make their growth a living, breathing journey.

Whether you take one or all of the above suggestions is irrelevant. What is important is that if you desire to get better as a leader, it is important that you develop and execute on a plan to do so. My hope is that this article will motivate you to develop a leadership growth plan and put it into action. Why? As leadership expert Mark Miller tell us, "*Great leaders grow.*" ●

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