



Article from

The Stepping Stone

November 2017

Issue 67

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Stretch Yourself!

By Mitchell Stephenson

“There is a small town on the Minnesota prairie where all the women are strong, all the men are good-looking, and all the children are above average.”

—Garrison Keillor

You probably recognize this quote from *A Prairie Home Companion*. If the description of the people in this fictional town, Lake Wobegon, made you chuckle, it may be because it sounds all too familiar. This human tendency—to think that we are all better than average—characterizes what social psychologists refer to as the “Lake Wobegon effect.”

In their book, *Compelling People: The Hidden Qualities That Make Us Influential*, authors John Neffinger and Matthew Kohut describe this effect: “Most of us think we are better than average in a variety of ways. Very few people describe themselves as below average in driving skills or intelligence, but by definition half are above and half are below.”¹

To say it another way, we all need to be self-aware, and we all need to work on certain things. Or, to use a term your manager may have used in a mid-year or year-end review, we all have “development items.” To work on these development items, we need to stretch beyond that which makes us comfortable, and we need to do some things differently to improve. After all, if we don’t stretch and try to make changes, while still expecting to get better, we will have met a definition of insanity commonly attributed to Albert Einstein, which is “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”

Author John Maxwell describes the law of intentionality in his book *The 15 Invaluable Laws of Growth* as “growth doesn’t just happen.”² We need to explicitly focus on growth. There are always ways in which we all can grow and stretch ourselves, push ahead into that uncomfortable zone, get better and improve. Sometimes the hardest part is simply figuring out how to begin.

Here are some suggestions on how to start challenging yourself to develop, improve and stretch:



- **Use your free time to learn.** Do this on your commute, in the evening at home, or even by carving out some time every week at work, to learn new things. Read, listen to audiobooks, or talk to people from whom you can learn. Per author and speaker Jim Rohn, “The biggest reason people don’t succeed is they don’t expose themselves to existing information.”³
- **Use your existing resources.** Reference the Society of Actuaries’ Competency Framework, take advantage of your company’s internal development program, and use the resources available to you on the Leadership & Development (L&D) Section website. If you haven’t been to the L&D website, check it out: www.SOA.org/ld.
- **Get started, even though you might fail.** Author Robert T. Kiyosaki says, “Failure is part of the process of success.”

Most important is to keep moving in the direction you want to go, slowly, steadily and over time.

People who avoid failure also avoid success.”⁴ Don’t be afraid to try new things to get better. By failing we learn what doesn’t work for us, and we can avoid those things in the future.

- **Put it into practice.** In *Compelling People*, Neffinger and Kohut say that “if you want to play a violin, you practice. If you want to get better at work, and develop too, you have to practice; it’s not going to just happen.”⁵ After you figure out what you need to do to stretch yourself and to get better, figure out how to start putting it into practice, if you want to see results.
- **Make incremental, but consistent changes.** “Setting small, attainable goals throughout the year, instead of a singular, overwhelming goal on January 1 can help you reach whatever it is you strive for,” said psychologist Lynn Bufka in a news release by the American Psychological Association.⁶ Progress is more likely if you don’t try to change too many things all at once. Most important is to keep moving in the direction you want to go, slowly, steadily and over time.

All of us should aspire to grow and to stretch. Putting some of these practices into place can help us to apply the law of intentionality to our own personal and professional lives. Get motivated, and don’t be afraid to fail.

Most of all, consider this adage, which is attributed to famous sculptor and poet Michelangelo, to get, and to keep, you motivated: “*The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it; but that it is too low and we reach it.*” ■



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ENDNOTES

- 1 Neffinger, John, and Matthew Kohut. 2013. *Compelling People: The Hidden Qualities That Make Us Influential*. Hudson City Press.
- 2 Maxwell, John. 2012. *The 15 Invaluable Laws of Growth*. Center Street.
- 3 Gitomer, Jeffrey. 2017. *Little Gold Book of Yes! Attitude*. Shippensburg, Pennsylvania: Sound Wisdom.
- 4 Kiyosaki, Robert T. 2011. *Rich Dad, Poor Dad*. Scottsdale, Arizona: Plata Publishing.
- 5 *Supra*, note 1.
- 6 <http://www.apa.org/helpcenter/resolution.aspx>