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# Thoughts on Personal Development

By Sophia Dao

**W**hen people hear about the “Management and Personal Development” Section, they think it has to do with management and leadership. This is true, but not the whole truth. Our section is also about personal development. After all, you cannot be a good manager of others if you don’t manage yourself well.

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase “personal development”? In a professional context, it may mean learning new skills and acquiring new knowledge. Let me introduce a new, more holistic definition: developing your body, mind, heart and spirit. You cannot truly develop as a professional until you develop as a person. Personal development is not a goal. It’s a journey.

## DEVELOPING THE BODY

Without our body, we do not exist. Yet many of us neglect or abuse our bodies. The most dangerous enemy of our body is inertia, and to experience inertia is “our default response in life.”<sup>1</sup> Inertia is the reason we spend mindless hours watching TV, surfing the net, or doing countless other life-wasting activities.

To combat inertia, have a goal. I came from a culture that rarely emphasizes physical development. So, my goal is to take baby steps. For example, set aside 15-20 minutes a day to exercise, pay attention to what I eat, and get enough sleep. No matter how big or small, specific or vague, your goal is, just have one for your physical development. The point is to live purposefully and not let inertia take over.

## DEVELOPING THE MIND

Like the body, the mind needs regular nourishment in order to survive and grow. Someone told me once that he felt “more stupid everyday” since he left school and entered the workforce. Learning doesn’t have to stop once you leave school or get your FSA.

One way to keep your mind active is to make sure you learn new things in your job. It can be small things like learning a new Excel trick. Teaching others is also a good way to develop your mind, since teaching requires thinking and organizing



your thoughts, and often points out nuances that you realize you don’t know as well as you thought.

Another way to develop your mind is to expand your horizon. Take night classes or pick up a new hobby. If your company offers educational assistance, take advantage of it. We are all busy with work and family, but investing in yourself should be on your priority list. Even if you have only 30 minutes a day for your intellectual development, you will be surprised at how much difference it makes.

Finally, if you have no time or desire to take classes, read. The most interesting people I know are readers. They usually have thought-provoking conversations and great insights. It does not matter what you read (fiction or nonfiction). You’d be amazed at how much knowledge you acquire through reading. If you cannot find time to sit down and read a book, listen to audio books during your commute. It’s a good way to convert downtime into intellectual growth.

## DEVELOPING THE HEART

Developing your heart means following your passion, building relationships, and seeking meaning in your life. For most of us, the best



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moments in life are when we do the things we love with the people we care deeply about. Be mindful of what you do and who you spend time with.

In order to be mindful of what you do, Marshall Goldsmith recommends that as you go through your day, evaluate every activity on a 1-10 scale on two questions<sup>2</sup>:

1. How much long-term benefit or meaning did I experience from this activity?
2. How much short-term satisfaction or happiness did I experience in this activity?

I personally think that evaluating “every activity” is unrealistic, but I like the idea. You can just focus on your major activities (things that you spend more than an hour doing). The goal is to be aware of where you spend your time. Eventually, you’ll choose your activities more wisely.

In order to choose wisely who you should spend time with, ask a simple question: “Am I better off or worse off because of having this person in my life?”<sup>3</sup> Note that this is not the same as asking “What can this person do for me?” The latter is utilitarian in nature. The former is more about what a certain relationship means to you and what influence it has on your life. Your time is not unlimited. Invest it in relationships that have positive impacts on you and those involved instead of wasting it on toxic ones that are good for nobody.

### DEVELOPING THE SPIRIT

This is “character development.” Your spirit is your character, your attitude in life. I’m skeptical by nature. I do not believe that positive thinking will solve all problems. However, I do believe in reframing.

For example, you just received a less-than-stellar performance review. You are furious at your boss for not seeing how great you are. Instead of fuming or feeling sorry for yourself, you could realize that perception is reality. A good way to reframe this is to ask yourself the question: “What might have prevented my boss from recognizing how great my work was?” It does not always work in your favor, but at least you take actions instead of wallowing in self-pity.

People who accept the fact that life is not always fair and who have character do not let small stuff

ruin their day. When you are upset or worry about something, think of the worst things that have happened to you or to your loved ones. This may sound counter-intuitive, but it’s called perspective. Your bad performance review becomes absurdly trivial once you stack it up against your near-death experience, or some other real suffering you’ve been through. If, after serious reflection, you conclude that your bad performance review is really the worst thing that has ever happened to you, count yourself lucky.

I believe that no one can go through life free of mishaps, but how one deals with them makes a difference. If you view mishaps as lessons learned or life experience, you will develop more character and become a stronger, better person.

### LET THE JOURNEY BEGIN!

“The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”<sup>4</sup> Before you take that first step, though, look deep inside yourself. What are your core values? What’s important to you? Stephen Covey suggests that you “begin with the end in mind” by picturing your own funeral. What would your family, friends, colleagues, and people in your community say about you? What do you want to hear? This exercise will help you focus on doing the right things.

I leave you with one of my favorite quotes from *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*:

If the ladder is not leaning against the right wall, every step we take just gets us to the wrong place faster. We may be very busy, we may be very *efficient*, but we will also be truly *effective* only when we begin with the end in mind.<sup>5</sup> ●

### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Marshall Goldsmith, *Mojo* (New York: Hyperion, 2009), page 34.
- <sup>2</sup> Marshall Goldsmith, *Mojo* (New York: Hyperion, 2009), page 36.
- <sup>3</sup> Marshall Goldsmith, *Mojo* (New York: Hyperion, 2009), page 173
- <sup>4</sup> Lao Tzu (c. 575 B.C.).
- <sup>5</sup> Stephen Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Free Press, 2004), page 98.