

Your best development plan may be what you stop doing.

Usually when we think about development, we have become accustomed to thinking about what we should start doing. It has been programmed into most action planning sessions that as the final word in development, you consider what else you could do, do better, or do more of. The truth, however, is that the most powerful thing you might do is to consider what you simply stop doing.

When I say “simply stop doing” we know in reality, however, that it is not always that simple. The challenge to give up behaviours that are habitual and deeply embedded, is as much psychological as it is physical. The challenge of resisting the impulse to act and to keep doing what you’ve always done is not to be understated. An established pattern of behaviour is a hard habit to break, even if it has only been partially or occasionally successful or effective over time.

The leadership psychology is that the lure of intermittent reinforcement is in many ways the hardest habit to break. The experience or belief that it works sometimes or pays off now and again, is a seductive entrapment into the habitual. This combined with a high drive for achievement means that it can be much easier to make a compelling case, especially for high achievers, about what they could take on and why they should do more, rather than make the case for why they should do less.

The problem is that in a volatile world continuing to do something that doesn’t work, that is redundant, or no longer strategically future fit, is a major impediment to personal development and growth. This is not a time for more of the same thinking and if we truly want to liberate the leadership in all people and ensure that it is not the province of the select few, then challenging thinking that is self-limiting and changing behaviours that are not helpful would be a good place to start.

The best way forward, in a world where no one can be certain about the future (or even what tomorrow brings), will be to change the game, to disrupt the pattern and reframe the habitual default from “what I start” to “what I finish”. Instead of rushing into activity it might be time, to take the time, to reflect on what we can do without. Rather than being compelled to think about what else, think instead about what less. Stopping doing what no longer works may well be the simplest, yet most powerful, development plan we can make.

Imagine how our life and leadership would change if we stopped trying to please everybody or saying yes to every demand. What about spreading yourself thin or making commitments you can’t really keep. How about wanting to solve all problems yourself and not needing the support of others. And then you might be someone with an obsession to continually seek to improve what others do or be perfectionistic in all things, always.

All of these things are difficult to shift because they seem to be part of who we are, but it’s not changing everything we do that matters. The starting point is to identify the response that places the greatest restrictions on our capacity to bring our best self and what we stand for, to what we choose to do.

Importantly, what we stop doing can have benefits in itself by bringing us more time, more energy and greater focus. In addition, it frees up cognitive bandwidth to think big, dream large and reimagine a different, but better future. This moment of transition in how we live, learn, work and play can be a time to pause, to slow down and reflect on how we lead ourselves and others.

As we enter into development conversations and planning actions designed to help us build our future in a hybrid world, it is timely to challenge the typical habitual and shift our actions from the predictable responses to adaptive choices based on our future goals and long-term strategic intent.

Next time, faced with not only developing your own leadership, but also growing the leadership in others, resist the temptation to leap to take on more. Instead, take the time to reflect on what matters most in the life you want to lead and the leadership you want to bring to others and don’t forget that your best development plan may be to stop doing what no longer works – and probably never really did.