

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

Are You Waiting for Permission to Grow?

By Darcy Eikenberg

“We’ve cut back on our training—nothing I can do about that.”

“Our conference budgets have been cut, so it’ll be hard for me to stay current.”

“My manager doesn’t know any more than I do—how am I going to grow?”

Headed those comments in your workplace lately? If so, you’re not alone. One of the biggest laments uncovered in survey after survey is that the current lack of learning and development programs is a strong contributor to disengagement.

Makes sense, right? After all, you’re human. You want to learn, grow and increase your professional contribution—not sit there like a lump. You want to feel you’re making a difference, using

all of your abilities and talents. You want to be prepared for the future world of work—whatever that will be.

SO WHY ARE YOU WAITING FOR PERMISSION TO GROW?

It’s a losing game to wait for your boss/your CEO/your organization to change in order to accelerate your own learning and development. Sure, it would be great if all leaders recognized that coaching, teaching and training are investments, not expenses, but until then, it’s time for you to take control.

Here are three simple actions you can take right now. Try one and create dramatic changes in your career and your overall growth.

LEARN FROM YOUR COLLEAGUES

The richest source of fresh information and insights is often the one most overlooked—your co-workers.

What does someone else know or do well that you want to do, too? An expertise exchange is an easy way to put that person’s knowledge into your toolbox—and build working relationships too.

Think about what you’re ready to learn. Then pay attention to who comes to mind as a great example of that talent, and invite them to connect:

- “Amy, I’d like to strengthen my negotiation skills, and you do this really well. Would you be open to having lunch with me and letting me pick your brain about your thought processes and preparation steps?”
- “Greg, your presentations are always impressive, and I’d love to improve my own. Could we schedule a call and talk more about what you do behind the scenes to make these work so well?”

In addition, you might notice broader topics just ripe for group learning. Do yourself and others a favor—organize a lunch, Google video hangout, or conference call on the subject.

- “Here in marketing, we keep wondering about the real, everyday challenges of our colleagues in the customer service department. Let’s have lunch with a couple of CS people and hear their perspectives. I’ll invite Sarah—who do you want to include?”
- “Looks like we’re not having the all-hands meeting this year. Let’s do a mini-version with a few of us over a brown-bag lunch and hear what’s hot in each group.”

Remember, people are typically flattered to be asked to offer their expertise or ideas. A specific invitation makes it easy for them to share and for you to learn. Your colleagues have loads to share with each other—and you may learn something, too.

LEARN FROM THE FREEBIES

When budgets are tight, the tight get creative. We live in a unique time when there are millions of ways to accelerate our knowledge, all for free.

- **Books.** Remember them? It’s a myth to say that no one reads books anymore. Smart people still do. One undervalued resource is your public library. Many libraries today have online catalogs where you search for the book you want, request it online, and have it delivered to your local branch or download the e-book directly to your reader. It’s a free way to access different ideas—without the financial investment and the bedside clutter.
- **Trade magazines.** What periodicals cover your industry or profession? Many offer free subscriptions just for signing up and providing your demographic information. This helps the magazine show higher value to advertisers, and gets you access to the publication at no charge.
- **Online tools.** iTunes U has university-level courses on almost any topic, and YouTube continues to be a broad source for learning how to do almost anything. (Just consider the source carefully as you evaluate its advice.)

Finally, don’t overlook the free resources within your own company. What online learning tools are hanging out in a learning

management system (LMS), database or corporate intranet? What tuition reimbursement or corporate memberships to professional groups are already in place? Self-driven learning tools may already exist but often lack promotion to let you know they’re out there. Ask your HR resource to point you to the right place. (And if you discover something great, tell others!)

LEARN TO INVEST IN YOURSELF

Not getting enough growth from these sources? Need to make a giant leap? It’s time to invest in the hottest asset around—you.

Now is the time to invest in your own knowledge, your confidence, your talents and your character. Now is the time to change your expectations about who is responsible for your growth and learning (and psst—it’s not your boss, your department or your company).

It’s no longer smart to be penny-wise and pound-foolish when it comes to building your own professional assets. Do you spend \$80 a month on cable TV; yet balk at paying \$37 to attend a professional luncheon that yields valuable contacts and up-to-date insights? Maybe you work with a personal trainer at the gym to strengthen your muscles—why not work with a personal coach to strengthen your career?

Avoid the mindset that your career development should happen organically and that you can figure out all the answers yourself. Your house and car need experts to keep them running smoothly; your professional self demands the same.

Those who invest in themselves will find it pays off not only now, but throughout their lives. No matter what lies ahead for our economy and our world, **no one can take your growth away from you.** The investments you make in yourself create returns much larger than any spreadsheet can ever hold. ■



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