

Slight Shift Approach to Leadership: Does Setting Major Development Goals Work?

For effective leaders, slight shifts are more likely to create a bigger impact

by Brian J. Brim, Ed.D., and David Liebnau

When it comes to their own development, there's something irresistibly appealing to leaders about setting stretch goals. Just selecting one feels like an achievement. And the idea that with enough energy, focus, and initiative, meeting a single goal could dramatically improve a whole company and turn an executive into a better, more developed "super leader" -- well, who could resist that?

Slight shifts, born from your strengths as a leader, can create positive momentum in your organization.

Hard as it may be to refrain from setting major leadership development goals, it's probably better if executives resist. Gallup has worked with many leaders and managers over the years and has seen that setting stretch goals -- such as deciding to become a leader who can inspire others like Martin Luther King Jr. -- rarely works, for several reasons. Leaders must be reasonable about who they can and cannot be.

Setting reasonable developmental goals is important because as human beings, we all have solid pathways established in our brains that make up our core personality or self-image. Because of this, thinking that achieving a big objective will transform us overnight is not very realistic. We must be more patient. Change takes time and persistence, and it's best accomplished through *slight shifts*.

One way to think about your development as a leader is to imagine yourself as a ball rolling along in a groove. Leaders tend to stay in their groove. It fits them. It's their identity. It's easy. To make sense of how this groove develops, consider the difference between actions and practices.

Actions are the behaviors that you do with little thought. They are part of your repertoire, and they yield consistent and predictable results. The actions a leader usually takes are determined by the "groove" he or she has developed over time. But how can you grow as a leader if you're forever contained in this same groove? You can't, and that is where practices come in.

Practices are interventions that enable you to establish new ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. They are essential to expand and develop your identity. To grow as a leader, you must slowly and steadily expand the groove. Adopting new practices enables you to access a different level of possible actions and create new opportunities.

Development is not about "jumping the groove." It's about "expanding the groove," or taking the best of who you naturally are and pushing the boundaries of those elements to grow as a leader.

Expanding the groove

The best way to expand your groove is gradually, by applying slight-shift practices. Stretching your boundaries a little at a time gives you a chance to test and reflect. It allows you to build on the best of who you are, replay your highlight reels, and analyze your successes and struggles. As you build on what's working and correct what's not, you start feeling more positive about the changes you see. Then you want to do it again.

Slight shifts emphasize evolutionary, rather than revolutionary, change. You accomplish them by establishing realistic practices that enable you to experience and understand new behaviors, which in turn allow you to change and grow for the better.

A participant in a leadership development session offered a perfect example of how to make a slight shift through effective practice. This leader was a highly focused individual. Although she cared deeply about her employees and knew she should spend more time with them, her strong work ethic pushed her to spend most of her time "chained to her desk," as she described it.

So she set a major development goal to "become connected as deeply and meaningfully" as her predecessor, a beloved leader who left a legacy of meaningful relationships throughout the organization. She tried to achieve her goal by completely reorganizing her schedule and priorities in an attempt to institutionalize contact with her employees. She scheduled a flurry of weekly group meetings with different parts of the organization. But she just didn't get the results or the sense of real connection that she was looking for. Her activities felt "forced" because her major stretch goal wasn't based on who she was.

After taking part in a leadership development session, she began to look at the problem differently. She thought about what changes would work best for her instead of trying to mimic her predecessor, and it prompted her to try something new.

In the end, what worked best for her was to say "yes" more often. She made it a goal to say "yes" one time per week when she was asked to join the team for lunch, a birthday celebration, or a walk around the manufacturing floor. She realized she was more effective one on one or in small groups that evolved spontaneously rather than in larger, more formal settings. She also started asking questions to learn more about the people in her organization. She found out, for example, that one person was running in a half-marathon, and that prompted a great conversation because she was an avid runner herself.

She soon realized that she was more energized and more productive after each "yes," so she extended her leadership practice to saying "yes" at least once a day. Interacting with her employees daily is now part of her routine.

Easy, but effective

Applying slight-shift practices seems easy -- maybe too easy. But that's the point: When leaders are asked to do something they have the confidence to do *and* they see immediate success, they gain confidence from the positive feedback. Confidence and success drive them to repeat it. That's how sustainable development and wider grooves are created, and that's how great results happen.

Gallup has seen this approach work repeatedly. Over a six-month period, one company saw a jump in employee engagement, as measured by Gallup's Q¹² employee engagement metric, from the 70th to the 80th percentile and a 6% increase in overall per-person productivity. Before this organization started using the slight-shift approach to leadership, performance hadn't varied much over the prior three years. One leader told Gallup that this slight-shift approach meant he took five minutes to deal with problems on the spot rather than putting them off and leaving them to fester.

Slight shifts, born from your strengths as a leader, can create positive momentum in others that will ignite the soul of an organization. It doesn't take much effort. It doesn't feel audacious. But slight shifts can be effective and permanent -- and you can start practicing them now.

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