



Episode 21: The 2 Key Steps to Personal Growth

Welcome to In the Right Direction podcast, where we believe you get to choose what's on your plate, you can manage the overwhelm, and that change is possible. I'm your host, Deb Elbaum and I'm here to share insights and strategies to increase your happiness, one baby step at a time. Let's dive in.

Hi everyone, it's Deb. Let me ask you a few questions. What do you think is the key to personal growth? And how does leadership development actually happen?

Today, let's talk about the process of personal and professional development, and make it super simple to understand and apply. Because, as we all know, the field of self-help can be overwhelming. With an abundance of online personality quizzes, articles, books, and TED talks -- how do you know where to start?

I want to demystify the process of personal growth and leadership development, because the more clarity we have about something then makes it easier to digest and apply to our lives. In today's podcast, I'm going to share the foundation of personal and professional development, and a framework and structure that you can use both for you as well as for those you coach and mentor.

This foundation of personal and professional growth has 2 key pieces. The first piece is awareness. The second piece is choice. That's it. If you want to grow as a leader or human being – to overcome your impostor syndrome, to delegate more, or even to find a new job – it takes awareness and choice.

Let's take these concepts one at a time.

First, personal growth takes awareness. You can't know where you're going until you know where you are. You can't know what you want to put attention to and create, until you understand your current habits, mindsets, behaviors, and situation.

Awareness involves understanding both you and the environment around you. It needs to be both internally and externally directed. Internally directed self-awareness means reflecting on your guiding beliefs, your habitual patterns, the comfort zone you operate in, and the longings you have. Externally directed awareness means understanding the environment around you better, like the culture of the organization you're in, the people around you, and the constraints you're operating under.

And here's the really important piece – to be most productive, your awareness needs to be nonjudgmental. Now being nonjudgmental can be really hard, because it means seeing and recognizing what's happening objectively, without all of the inner critic commentary. Because when our inner critic narrates, it skews our view of a situation and puts us in a thinking perspective that is unproductive and ineffective.

Instead of being judgmental, I invite you to step into awareness with curiosity. Awareness requires curiosity, about ourselves and our environment. And the cool thing about curiosity is that it naturally leads to questions we can ask ourselves. Questions like: What's really important to me about this? What do I really want? And, What are my core values? When we get curious, it allows our brain to think productively.

Building awareness is empowering because it's the first step to getting clarity around what's in our control and not in our control, where we have agency, and where we might have to let go of something.

And building awareness naturally leads to the next step of personal growth, which is choice.

After we are clearer about what's going on with us, with others, and in our environment, we get to exercise choice.

I love to remind my clients, that choosing intentionally is empowering. I also love to remind them that in every situation, we have a choice. It might be a big choice, like asking for more responsibility at work, or it might be a small choice, like taking a few deep breaths during a difficult conversation. There's always more in our control than we think, and our opportunity is to recognize what's in our control and then make a choice that honors our values, purpose, and priorities.

We have so many choices! We can choose to take an action, to see something from another mindset, to write a new self-narrative, to ask for help, to disengage from a relationship, and to communicate a certain message. And in our communication, we have choices around our words, tone, and body language. In our digital communication, we have choices around response time, length of emails, and the questions we might ask others.

Often, we fail to realize how many choices we actually have, because most of the time we operate on auto pilot. This means that we do what we've always done, communicate how we've always communicated, and see people from the same perspective we always see them from – because being on autopilot takes significantly less brain energy. Plus, our autopilot brain pathways are already well established.

It takes effort and energy to build self-awareness and choose intentionally. After all, personal growth involves building new brain pathways. That takes attention and intention. And I'm going to say that the energy it takes for awareness and choice is completely worth it. Because using the framework of awareness and choice will help you feel more empowered, have more of control in your life, be clearer about what you want and what's in your control, and help you write a self-narrative that you feel proud of.

Let me share an example from coaching, how we put the concepts of awareness and choice into action.

A client and I were talking about setting boundaries. This client works long hours in a job she loves, and yet she often feels like she's short-changing her family at the expense of her manager, who she feels doesn't fully appreciate her. She does not feel clear about setting or communicating her boundaries and this makes it hard for her to know when to say Yes and No to things at work and at home. Without this clarity, she often feels like she's disappointing people.

In our coaching, we started by talking about awareness. And my client talked through a few different recent situations, to understand her habits. What she found most interesting was that when she tells her boss she'll be late to something, she's maybe 5 minutes late. In contrast, when she tells her family she'll be late to something, she's more like an hour late. What was interesting to her is that she seems to have different standards and personal expectations for her relationship with her boss and her family.

Building awareness naturally leads to the next step, which is choice. And the question to start with for choice is, What are my choices?

Before we actually make a choice, it's really helpful to identify different possible choices, so that we know that our choice is thoughtful and intentional.

In my client's case, her goal was to feel like she was setting clearer boundaries. So I asked her, what are a few choices you have? Here were some ideas that came to her mind: She said, I could talk with my family about how I feel like I'm disappointing them, so that they know my thoughts and feelings. I could apply the same mindset of "late equals 5 minutes" to my family. I could let my boss know when I have a hard stop and actually leave when I say I'm going to leave. I could be more compassionate with myself, knowing that I do have an unpredictable job. Or I could have a ritual that I do with my children when I come home to show that I'm present and excited to see them.

Do you get the idea? Taking the time to identify different potential choices reminded my client that she does have agency and power, and that there are things – even small things – that she can do to feel like she's setting stronger boundaries.

Let's bring this to you.

If you want to operationalize the concepts of awareness and choice, here's how to start:

Determine which part of your life or leadership needs clarity and a plan.

Then start by building awareness. Reflect on your situation. Get curious about your mindset, your behaviors, and what's going on around you. Ask yourself open-ended questions, or you might even journal whatever's on your mind. Please remember, though, to avoid judgment.

Next, step into choice. Ask yourself, given the situation, what are 5 choices that I have right now? Again, these can be about communication, your thoughts, or your behaviors.

After you've identified a number of choices, I want you to choose intentionally, based on your goal, what's most important to you, and the story you want to create. And that's it! That's how you use these concepts of awareness and choice for your personal and professional development.

And if you'd like, I have something for you that might help. I created a coach-yourself-at-home card deck that makes it easier to build your awareness and choice. My card deck of 36 coaching cards includes questions that you can ask yourself and others as a way to build awareness and choice. If you would like to purchase a coaching card deck, please email me at deb@debelbaum.com.

Thank you so much for being part of my community, and thank you for your commitment to your personal growth. I know the world's a better place for it. As always, please email me at deb@debelbaum.com if I can be helpful.

Until next time!