



Episode 66: How to Make Leadership Development Easy

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. Today we're going to talk about leadership development – in other words, how you grow as a leader. Life is about learning and growing. If you are listening to my podcast, you likely care about professional growth. I'm guessing you're committed to being a better leader, colleague, and human being.

As we move through life, we naturally evolve. Our bodies change, we gain more life experience, and our thinking often shifts. Hopefully, through this process, we become better versions of ourselves – more aware of our strengths and challenges, how we want to show up, and the impact we want to have on those around us.

Professional growth is a necessary piece of working with and leading others. The most effective leaders are clear on what they're working toward and what others can count on them for.

Leadership development takes reflection, experience, and courage. And for leadership development to be positive and productive, it also takes a certain mindset and approach.

Today, I'll share a way to approach your leadership development so that you can maximize your learning, progress, and growth. This approach is both a perspective and a framework that can be helpful with whatever leadership goals you're currently working toward. It can make the process of leadership development clearer, more structured, and easier.

When we talk about how we approach something, we're talking about the coaching concept of perspective. If you've listened to my podcasts before, you know I talk about perspective a lot.

Our perspective is the way we think about and work toward something. Because our perspective creates our reality, it's imperative to recognize the perspective we're in as we focus on an area of our life. Our current perspective – aka, our attitude -- influences how we feel, what we say, and we see. This, in turn, affects how we think, strategize, communicate, and act.

If you want to see progress in your leadership development, it helps to be in a perspective that allows for taking action, “failing fast,” and learning. And we learn more quickly when our brains are relaxed and we're having fun.

Being hard on ourselves and focusing only on our weaknesses impedes our learning and growth.

For example, one perspective that often makes leadership development harder than it needs to be is that of the perfectionist inner critic. When we're in the inner critic perspective, we hear an inner voice that tells us we have to know everything and do everything perfectly. Our inner critic says: “What if I try this and fail? What if others talk about me? What if I make a mistake?”

Leadership development from this perspective can feel daunting, unattainable, and like a process with very high stakes.

Instead, my goal for clients is to approach their leadership development with more ease, and from a place of building on strengths, recognizing progress, and clarifying learnings. My goal is for clients to see their growth as a series of successes as they take baby steps that map toward their big goals.

Today's tool and framework is one that can help make the process of professional growth easier and more fun.

The idea and framework we're talking about today is bringing an **experiment** mindset to leadership development.

When we're in an experiment mindset, we can more easily approach professional growth as an experiment – as something that's being tested, tried out, understood, and reflected upon.

Because that's exactly what leadership is – an experiment. There is no one perfect way to lead. Leadership is situational and depends on factors that are constantly changing.

Successful leaders adapt to the current needs of the organization, their team, and the larger environment. A communication strategy that worked in one meeting might need to be tweaked for the next. Different leadership qualities are needed for working with different stakeholder groups.

The most effective way to adapt to an evolving and ambiguous environment is to try different things to see what happens – to experiment. Embedded in the idea of an experiment are a growth mindset, the concept of permission, and the invitation to take action and see what happens.

Getting into an experiment mindset requires an intentional way of thinking. It's letting go of the right and wrong, good and bad, and instead leaning into thinking like a scientist. Scientists craft experiments and gather data. They ask themselves: What did I do? What was the experiment? What did I notice? What data did I gather? What's next?

Questions like these form the basis of the experiment framework that you can use. The experiment framework has 3 pieces to think about, each with its own questions to answer.

The first piece of the framework is about the action you took: What did you do? What did you try?

The second piece of the framework is the result and data you gathered: What happened? What data did you collect?

The third piece of the framework is the learning: What are you realizing? What's possible to try next?

Applying this mindset and framework to all of the things you're doing and want to do as a leader can help you take action more easily and quickly so that you can capture and apply learned realizations.

Here's an example of how I talk about this with clients.

I was working with a client who wanted to strengthen her relationship with her new boss. She knew she had been too much of a people pleaser in the past, and she had a developmental goal of building her executive presence and communicating more forcefully when needed.

Based on her leadership goal, my client decided she would try the experiment of asking her boss how direct he'd like her to be. She assumed others wanted her to be a certain way, and she wanted to better understand the reality, so that she could support people in the way that worked best for them.

When you use the experiment framework, step one is to choose an experiment. Small experiments, like asking a question, are a great way to start.

Step two is to notice what happened – from an objective and data-gathering place. The questions to ask yourself are: What happened? What data did I gather?

In my client's case, what happened is that her boss told her that he wanted her to be more direct. Because of her expertise, he said that relied on her to tell it to him straight. This was enlightening data for my client, and easy for her to put into action.

Data is helpful, because it guides what we do next.

The third part of the experiment framework is to capture the learning. This involves asking questions like: What am I realizing? What are my takeaways? What's next?

For my client, she realized that it was easy to ask her boss about his expectations. She realized that she wanted to have more of these conversations with her new colleagues.

This small experiment was incredibly helpful for my client. In a short amount of time and with relative ease, it allowed her to show up differently in meetings. It helped her strengthen other relationships, and gave her permission to communicate in new and confident ways.

The experiment framework offers a structured process for personal and professional growth and can be used proactively, like in the example I shared. It can also be used retrospectively, when you reflect on the things you've been trying and learning. Reframing past actions as learning experiments is an especially effective way to shift from hearing your inner critic to instead seeing yourself as a learner.

When you reframe your growth as an experiment, and recognize the courage and commitment it takes to try new things, it's easier to be more forgiving of your actions, prouder of your accomplishments, and clearer about who you aspire to be.

Thank you so much for listening and being part of my community. If you want help with your leadership development and professional growth, please reach out. Email me at deb@debelbaum.com or go to my website debelbaum.com to schedule a consult. I look forward to it. I'm here to help you create your best self at home and at work, so that you're confident you're moving in the right direction for you.

Until next time!