
You Can Learn and Get Work Done at the Same Time

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As you think about how you want to learn and grow this year, don't fall victim to the common trap of building your development plan around a formal learning program. Although we default to equating development with structured, instructor-led activities, you'd be better served to think of formal programs as the appetizer or dessert of your development, rather than the main course.

You take three risks when you depend on formal courses for nourishment. First, you risk being disappointed if your request can't be funded because other priorities take precedent. Second, you underestimate how costly it is for you to be away from work, both in your increased workload before and after the training and in the price your team pays in backfilling for you. Finally, focusing on formal development can reinforce a passive mindset and leave you with the false impression that your development is in someone else's hands.

You're much better served by fulfilling the majority of your development needs on the job. By "on the job," I mean taking activities that you would be completing anyway and using them to develop a new skill. Once you have this sort of development mind-set, a team meeting can become a chance to strengthen your communication skills. A morning of returning email can become a chance to apply a new organization system. An afternoon of customer interactions can become a chance to hone your business development pitch. Here's how:

First, decide on a skill you want to develop. Choose wisely by identifying a skill that's valued in your organization. Human Resources can tell you if your company has a competency model or career ladder, which describes the most important knowledge, skills, and attributes for a given career path. In the absence of an official list of competencies, ask for ideas from your manager or your colleagues about the skills that would be most vital for you to develop. I highly recommend choosing only one — make it a meaty one — and then using it as a theme that will carry you through the year. Some examples might include becoming a more strategic thinker, improving communication skills, or enhancing your presence and personal brand.

Second, do some research on the skill you're trying to develop. You can find blogs from subject matter experts on almost any topic, not to mention a nearly infinite supply of YouTube videos. All told, you have a lifetime of learning at your fingertips. Find spare moments to read up on the skill and keep a folder where you can begin to classify the skill into different subcomponents. For example, if you are working to improve your communication skills, your research might reveal that communication can be broken down into sharpening your ideas and content, clarifying your writing, enhancing your oral communication skills, and improving your listening skills. Whether you want to use old-school index cards or a high-tech app, organize and keep track of what you learn in a way that allows you to drill down several layers into each component. You'll find that once you zero in on one component, new distinctions will be revealed. For example, oral communication will require that you improve both your verbal and non-verbal presentation.

Third, set a series of progressive goals. Once you understand the different components of the skill you're building, choose one and break it down even further. In the communication example, you might decide that the content of your ideas is strong but you struggle to express your ideas in a meeting because you're quiet. Start by setting your end goal and then work backward to create a series of small but meaningful steps. If you aspire to participate more actively and to have your ideas heard and appreciated by your teammates, start by committing to make one comment in your next team meeting. Once you've practiced being more vocal, your goals can evolve to making your points more concisely or getting comfortable disagreeing with someone in a public forum. Create a cheat sheet for yourself with these goals in order and check them off as you accomplish them.

Fourth, ask a colleague for feedback to get a sense of how you're doing. Engaging a colleague will accelerate your progress. Tell the person what you're working on and get some generic feedback or advice from them. Then share your specific goals and ask the person to watch and provide feedback. Don't make this formal or cumbersome, just a quick check-in. In the communication example, as you are walking into the team meeting, you can say, "I'm working on being more concise. Can you pay attention and let me know how I do?" Then as you are walking out of the meeting, you can get immediate feedback and a few pointers. Occasionally, have a lengthier discussion about what your colleague is observing and what he would recommend you work on next.

Once you've achieved one goal, move on to the next. Move through all the goals until you've mastered one component of the skill. Then move to the next component and repeat the same process. With a skill such as communication, you can devote an entire year (and likely an entire lifetime) to exploring and refining your skills. Be sure to refer to your efforts in your performance management conversations so your manager understands what you're working on and can support you.

When you use the activities you're already engaged in as the forum for building new skills, you take control of your own development. You aren't vulnerable to training being defunded. You aren't overwhelmed by adding tasks to your already overflowing calendar. You aren't losing accountability by abdicating the responsibility for your growth and development. You're nourishing yourself with a steady diet of learning.

And then you're entitled to a little dessert. By that I mean once you've learned what you can from free resources, applied new concepts and built new skills, and done the difficult work of seeking out and applying feedback, you've earned access to a formal learning program and you shouldn't be sheepish about asking for it. The good news is that with the investment you've already made, you'll be in a great position to benefit from what you learn.