

IT'S NOT MY PROBLEM

“Everyone wants to live on top of the mountain, but all the happiness and growth occurs while you’re climbing it.”

—Andy Rooney

Not many years ago, I would have looked at a book like this and said, *“Please no! Not another book about change!”* At that time, I never entertained the thought that perhaps I might need to make personal changes, particularly in how I was leading. When promoted to a vice president position in a large retail corporation, I thought I was ready to be an effective leader to my new team. My intentions were set. We were going to do great things. I had all the answers (or so I thought), and I knew just what to do. Then came the results . . . less than stellar. And the team . . . less than satisfied.

Looking back, I know that a few simple changes would have made a huge difference. But given all that we needed to get done, from merging processes to building new curriculum for 200,000+ employees, I was left with neither the time nor the desire to think about my needed personal changes. It’s clear now—based on my own personal growth and through the work with my clients over the past several years.

The point is this: it’s not about how smart or experienced

we are as leaders that creates our success. It's about how self-aware we are and how well we observe ourselves in action to allow us to shift seamlessly along the way.

This is about important, less obvious change—at least to the one who needs to change.

When you think about personal growth, what comes to mind? Here are some favorite client comments made when they first think about growing or making a change. How many of these comments do you say when confronted with a suggestion to make a change?

- » No one asked me.
- » It's not my problem—it belongs to a couple of people on my team.
- » I just need my team to step up.
- » It's my boss (or company) who needs to change.
- » I'm doing okay.
- » I don't have time.
- » What you see is what you get.
- » I got to this point okay. Why would I want to change now?
- » I don't want to. I'm not willing to try.
- » I can't change who I am
- » Me change? Ain't gonna happen!

It's easy to fall into the rut of denial, and who has any extra time to devote to making personal changes, even if the need is felt? A favorite discussion with my clients (who initially make one of these statements) is several months later, when they feel quite differently about themselves and their work. They discover they often have more time after making just one simple shift. At the very least, they understand how to choose a new approach.

Deciding to commit to personal change is by far the hardest step. Once that decision is made, the rest becomes an adventure that creates new self-discoveries and great opportunities to explore. Just deciding to act on one small change can open the door to great possibilities.

You'll meet several people in this book who said yes to that first small change and learn how they now laugh at those initial statements of doubt.

WHAT IS GROWTH?

“To succeed in this world, you have to change all the time.”

—Sam Walton

It's the journey, not the destination. We've all heard that one. Growth has often been defined as the various stages of development. If you think about the last time you experienced significant growth, it's probably connected to an event, a project, a new job, a job loss, or a new relationship. Usually, we don't reflect on the stages of our growth independent from the event. We center in on the obvious outcomes rather than how we grew in the process or through the phases.

For example, think about a significant change you experienced in the last year. You are most likely thinking about the event and the outcomes. Now, take a few moments to think about all the things you experienced as you moved through the change and how it allowed you to stretch and grow. Jot down a few notes about the experience in your notebook. Even just a couple of bullet points will do. The very realization of the process is critical to taking your growth to the next level. It's how we understand where we are and how we got there. I'll keep reminding you of this important point.



Meet David and Neil. They made very important, simple changes in their leadership approaches that positively affected their whole lives. Both had similar obvious concerns with their teams and the results driven by specific organizational events.



MY TEAM JUST NEEDS TO STEP UP

David, a senior level leader in a large organization, was responsible for achieving widespread company change, including tactical system changes and process changes. David was looking to develop ways to help his project team, so the change-affected employees would “get on board” with the new processes and systems as quickly as possible.

During my first meeting with David, I asked him to describe his experience in making similar changes. He quickly confessed that his teams’ past change efforts had been less than favorable, and he felt there wasn’t enough training in the new processes for the change-affected employees to achieve the successful outcome he had planned. It was a discussion I have heard many times, both throughout my career and with clients. When we’re charged with implementing any change, we want to find the quickest, easiest, most consistent plan to move others to accept the change. Unfortunately, in this case and many others, these actions are rarely the most effective solutions.

David and I spent time exploring those past change efforts and identifying all of the things that prevented the desired results. The more David reflected, the more he began to discover that training was not the key problem behind past change-result disappointments. We created a clear picture of exactly what was changing inside David’s current initiative and defined desired outcomes. We began to discover the larger opportunities inside this change,

beginning with David, and most importantly, how he was leading change with his team, his peers, and his bosses.

David recognized that he was “controlling” the project instead of “leading the change.” David had managed his team with a set of standards that required strict compliance. He believed that specific rules, steps, and procedures were the necessary tools to manage his team and to implement change successfully.

The important shift for David was to discover what he needed to change in himself to model the behaviors he was expecting of his team. So, what began as an engagement to create change-management assistance became a coaching engagement designed to explore David’s leadership behaviors and approach.

David recognized how *he* needed to be different to create different outcomes. As he began to model new leadership behaviors and relax his need to control, his team began to respond with more energy and positivity. He started communicating with them—not at them—by asking good questions. He encouraged them to bring forward their ideas and concerns. As David established important listening opportunities for his team to course correct throughout the change-initiative process, they began presenting new and effective solutions.

David’s family noticed positive changes at home—a reminder that a shift in one place will likely affect another. When we experience growth in any part of our life, the benefits become apparent in all areas of our lives. David noted that family discussions had become more open, and more interesting. Through this experience, he recognized the importance of personal change to effectively influence organizational change.



DAVID’S SIMPLE SHIFTS:

Relax the need to control, ask good questions, and listen for opportunities



IT'S NOT MY PROBLEM

Neil was a brilliant and talented operations executive who was one of the top three internal successors to become the president of his company. He prided himself on all he knew based on his extensive experiences and educational background. He was bright, articulate, and in control of everything and everyone on his team of one-hundred-plus employees. Sound familiar? If so, then you too are probably feeling stressed and overwhelmed, and ready to break—just like Neil.

Neil was working so hard to control the results, he found himself spending much of his time making daily tactical decisions, solving problems, and feeling frustrated by the need to be present in all meetings or things wouldn't move forward. And his frustration came out in angry, abrupt bursts with his team—a recipe for disaster.

Neil was unaware of how his actions and leadership behaviors were creating the very problem he was trying to solve. He wanted to understand what to do with this team who depended on him for their every move. He didn't have the confidence that they were competent employees. His original coaching goal was to have me work with his team, not with him.

Now, you may be reading this and saying, *“Wow, that's not me. I hold my team accountable for making good decisions and following through to create positive results.”* Well, so did Neil, or so he thought. He was so sure that the problem was with the team and their issues, he couldn't see past his own blind spots to realize his behavior was at the heart of the problem.

The discovery for Neil was first to recognize exactly how he could effectively contribute to the team's performance. We centered on one behavior to begin his journey. Start listening. I asked Neil if he could stop talking in his next staff meeting and simply focus on

listening to his team. He agreed to this experiment and decided to open the staff meeting with a few good issue-focused, open-ended questions. Then he listened. A few of his staff members told him it was the best meeting they had ever had. The team had an opportunity to discuss critical issues from their perspective. It was an eye-opener for Neil, and it began his journey to loosen his control, understand more clearly the issues and challenges, and allow his team to manage the work.



NEIL'S SIMPLE SHIFTS:

Start listening and stop micromanaging.

LOOK INSIDE FOR REAL ANSWERS

If either Neil or David had focused only on their perception of the team problems, neither would have worked on the real issues. They both needed to go on a personal growth journey to work on the real issues to create sustainable solutions. Both David and Neil were able to go beneath the surface issues to discover that they were at the heart of their teams' difficulties. Each small change made along the way allowed them to clearly see and understand the kind of leadership impact that could positively affect their results.

Based on the feedback from others, Neil began to see himself more clearly and how his behaviors impacted his results. Our goal was not to fix or change everything about Neil, but rather to determine the few behavioral shifts that would create the greatest benefit to him, the team, and ultimately their results. Since his primary goal was to get better at listening, the first step for Neil was to stop talking and to begin asking different and better questions.

Neil watched how others reacted when he talked, helping him

It's not easy to face facts that as leaders, we frequently get in our own way.

to see whether he was getting through in the way he intended in order to avoid misunderstandings and the need to recover later. He also became more aware of *how* he listened in different situations with different people. He realized that in his haste to get things done, he had left little time to pause and allow for silence and thought to take place in discussions. Neil began to recognize that when he focused on actively listening and asking important questions, he was able to reach breakthrough solutions with his team—all from a single goal to listen better.

It's not easy to put the mirror up and face facts that as leaders, we frequently get in our own way. How often do you do or say things that create results just opposite of what you are trying to achieve? I know I have been guilty many times, particularly when under stress. If, as the Buddha said, "*the eye cannot see itself,*" then it's easy to understand how we can frequently be misinterpreted.

According to Robert Bolton, author of *People Skills*¹, there's always opportunity for trouble when our intentions don't align with our behaviors or actions. The concept is pretty simple. Here's the essence: only *you* know your true thoughts and intentions. Other people see only your behaviors and interpret your intentions through their own lens. It makes logical sense. And if we're self-aware at all, we know when our intentions don't align with our actions. Usually something just doesn't feel right, and our teams sense it too and then often draw incorrect assumptions about our intentions.

SEEING THE POSSIBILITIES

"Successful and unsuccessful people do not vary greatly in their abilities. They vary in their desires to reach their potential."
—John Maxwell

Being able to envision what's possible is about stepping outside of the way things currently are, and being able to see what could be different and better. The key is choosing to be open to new possibilities. For example, get your notebook and take a few moments to think about these questions and note your thoughts to help you determine what's possible:

- » What do I want to accomplish for myself and the people around me in the next six months? And what difference would that make for me if I am successful?
- » And, if I were incredibly successful, what would things look like?
- » What would people know, think, feel, do, and believe that they aren't today? What would be the best part?
- » What is challenging or standing in my way or slowing me down? What's missing?



Now take a look at how different that vision may be from what you are experiencing today. Are you starting to see how to build the beginnings of your change goal?

This is the important discovery phase, where you determine what's possible. It's looking at the big picture of what you truly want as an outcome and getting crystal clear about that vision. Good clarity is not always obvious, as you saw with David and Neil. It's so important to create a clear picture before you try to make any changes, so that you are sure to make the right changes, moving you toward your expected outcomes.

I've worked with companies making transformational change that can't articulate a clear picture of the desired outcomes so everyone can easily understand—a set up for disastrous results. Since large transformational change usually requires many phases or steps, it's often difficult for the teams and individuals to understand their specific roles and their connection to the bigger vision. Translating the vision into

clear, understandable pieces is critical. It's no different when you are working to create your own personal change goals.

As you review your vision of what's possible, keep these questions handy to help you explore your situation further. While you might not be able to answer them all fully yet, the next few chapters will provide you with further insight and tools to help.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER AS YOU THINK ABOUT YOUR GOALS:

- » Am I willing to move outside my comfort zone to explore higher levels of discovery and leadership competence?
- » Are my actions and words in sync with my intentions? How do I know?
- » What words describe me at my best? When I am less than my best?
- » How do my personal leadership behaviors add to or undermine the results I am trying to achieve?
- » What kind of support would help me discover what's possible for me?



VIEW FROM THE BALCONY

Alexis was promoted to a new management position in a large, global services provider organization, where she managed a virtual team of forty employees across eight states and two countries. She was excited about her big vision to streamline processes and create significant improvement toward consistency in project quality. It was a well-managed company with great opportunities to grow, and Alexis wanted to become more strategic in her approach to her new team and their large number of project deliverables.

Alexis was internally promoted and like many new managers, she struggled with letting go of the large amount of task work she was good at and comfortable with in her previous project lead role. The first month on the new job found her with *no* time to think, let alone to create a clear strategy. She found herself attending all of her staff's various project meetings to be sure she was kept in the loop. Because her team operated in many time zones, she didn't establish any clear boundaries around her availability. While this may be an extreme example, it's not unusual when a new manager wants to be sure she knows everything that's happening.

During our first sessions, Alexis began to clearly visualize this new role and what she specifically wanted to accomplish and, most importantly, what her team's successes could be within the first year. As she gained clarity with expected outcomes, she was able to articulate how she needed to manage the team and clarify her expectations. She identified specific characteristics that her best team leads possessed and learned how to expand their strengths.

The calendar came next, and Alexis used tools and exercises I've outlined in detail in chapter 6, including: fifteen-minute personal strategy meetings, scheduled reflection time, and energy-time management techniques.

Alexis recognized she needed to schedule specific time each week to get "off the dance floor" and "onto the balcony" for critical high-level views to see the bigger picture patterns and lead her virtual team more strategically. It took Alexis several fifteen-minute meetings with herself to just quiet her mind from all the busyness of her day to concentrate on her strategies, but she stayed the course and created a new, effective routine for herself. She now spends time at the beginning and end of each day with a spreadsheet of priorities that she uses as a guide to keep her on track with the big goals.



ALEXIS'S SIMPLE SHIFT:

Balancing technical details with leading strategically

Creating any new habit takes repetition. Most importantly, it builds capacity to do more. What possibilities are you starting to see? Are new goals starting to surface for you? At the very least, I'm sure you are realizing that your leadership behaviors create the results you are or are not getting. We'd like to believe that our intelligence drives our behaviors. However, behavioral ineffectiveness trumps intelligence every time!

Now that you've experienced a taste of real simple shifts, we'll move on to some important steps to help you reach that goal you identified.



REVIEW

“Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself.”

—Leo Tolstoy

What do you envision for yourself and others in the next six months, and what difference would it make if you were incredibly successful?

Do you observe yourself (objectively) in action to see what needs to shift?

As you focus on what could be better for you, are you sure that what you see as your presenting or obvious issues are the real ones?

If you are a new manager of people, are you clear with the personal changes you’ll need to make in your new role?

What are the similarities in David, Neil, or Alexis’s situation to yours?

If you’re an experienced leader, are there certain ineffective behaviors that everyone but you is aware of?