Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning.

Benjamin Franklin

You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

Mohandas K Gandhi

If you have an hour, will you not improve that hour, instead of idling it away?

Lord Chesterfield

Improving and Growing Yourself to Improve, Grow and Serve Your Church Organisation

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In The Twelve Absolutes of Leadership Gary Burnison recounts the story of a farmer whose donkey fell into a well. The farmer frantically thought about what he could do as the stricken animal cried out to be rescued. With no obvious solution, the farmer regretfully concluded that because the donkey was old and the well needed to be filled in anyway, he should give up the idea of rescuing the beast. Instead, he should simply fill in the well and hope the poor animal would not suffer too much.

The farmer asked his neighbours for help and they all began to shovel earth into the well. When the donkey realised what was happening, he brayed and struggled. Then, the noise stopped.

The farmer looked down into the well and was astonished at what he saw. The donkey was still alive and was progressing towards the top of the well. By shaking off the dirt instead of letting it cover him, he could step on the accumulating soil as the level rose. When the donkey reached the top, he stepped over the edge and gave the farmer one last look. “Now who’s the jackass?” the donkey remarked, and trotted happily away.

This story offers a key insight for those seeking to be effective Church leaders, who must have and demonstrate learning agility. The latter can be defined as the ability to learn from experience and to apply that learning to new situations. Learning agility is not the same thing as having a high IQ or EQ (emotional intelligence). Rather, a Church leader with learning agility can excel at absorbing information from his or her experiences and applying it to the present – thereby creating an agile Church organisation that also learns, grows and adapts.

Yes, learning as a Church leader is often about adapting, being open-minded, and being willing to find solutions that are not always obvious. As a Church leader you cannot expect to learn from things you are NOT doing! Consequently, there can be times when you should expect to fail. Such situations demand that you choose not to blame yourself but rather to learn. In fact, it has been said that the only real failure is failing to fail. A Church leader who fails to fail from time to time could either be unaware of what is going on or simply be acting too cautiously.

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A colleague recently reminded me of Peter Drucker’s distinction between management and leadership:

‘Management is doing things right – Leadership is doing the right things.’

It made me think again of the real nature of leadership. What helps us know how to do the right things? See here the fruit of some of my reflections:

**Art and Wisdom**

Leadership is the practice of an art. It is not an exact science and it is not accomplished simply by implementing rules.

Leadership is based on wisdom acquired by making mistakes and learning the right lessons from them.

**Character**

Leadership is best learnt and exercised by persons with certain personality traits.

Leadership comes from feeling good about yourself – avoiding self-destruction and not being over-sensitive to criticism, being humble and yet fearless and bold.

Leadership requires being energetic, persistent and self-disciplined and yet constantly encouraging others.

**Abilities**

Leadership comes from being able to listen to, having empathy with, and reading the minds of other people.

Leadership comes from being able to see the big picture while understanding how its elements relate to the whole.

Leadership is not lost in the detail of things and never micromanages.

Leadership comes from being able to focus on the essence in every given situation – a leader knows the difference between what is important and what is trivial.

Leadership comes from being able to bring a group together that acts toward a common goal.

Leadership comes from being able to communicate well – articulating your thoughts clearly while adapting to different kinds of situations and audiences.

**Attitude to My Leadership Role**

Leaders understand their central role in the process of inducing others to act toward a common goal – and know how to master this role.

Leadership is about relating so well to others that you are being followed.

Leaders lead by their actions, not their positions.

Leaders influence others by inspiring their trust, acting consistently, and motivating them by words and deeds.

Leaders lead by legitimate authority, setting an example, setting goals, rewarding success and dealing with failure, organisational restructuring, team-building, and communicating a vision.

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So how do you improve and grow yourself in order to improve and grow your Church organisation? One key requirement is your own preparedness to maintain an open and curious mind. In their book *Great Leaders Grow* Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller suggest that for a leader growing is like oxygen to a deep-sea diver - without it you die. Unlike the diver, you may not physically die – but if you stop growing, your influence may well erode, and over time, you may even lose the opportunity to lead at all.

The failure to grow has sabotaged the career of more Church leaders than just about anything else. Hence, your capacity to grow is crucial in determining your capacity to lead. If you wish to improve or grow your Church organisation, then you too must continue to improve and grow. Blanchard and Miller have utilised the acronym GROW to remind leaders of the key ingredients for fostering their personal and professional growth:

**G = Gaining Knowledge** – this ingredient includes knowing one’s own strengths and weaknesses; knowing the people one leads on a deep level (personally and professionally); knowing one’s industry extremely well; having a high level of mastery of the principles and practices of leadership; and having a detailed, written personal development plan.

**R = Reaching Out to Others** – this ingredient includes always looking for ways to invest in the growth of others; having ongoing mentoring relationships with emerging leaders; frequently seeing and seizing teachable moments; frequently sharing with others what one has learned; and developing a high level of mastery in communicating one’s point of view on leadership.

**O = Opening Your World** – this ingredient includes constantly looking for opportunities to grow at work; seeking new experiences outside the workplace; having a mentor(s) who helps you grow; always looking for additional opportunities to lead; and seeing every day as an opportunity to learn and grow.

**W = Walking toward Wisdom** – this ingredient includes consistently telling oneself the truth regarding one’s leadership; actively seeking feedback from those you know to be truth tellers; having a group of people you trust to...
Those who improve with age embrace the power of personal growth and personal achievement and begin to replace youth with wisdom, innocence with understanding, and lack of purpose with self-actualisation.

_Bo Bennett_

The beauty of life is, while we cannot undo what is done—we can see it, understand it, learn from it and change. So that every new moment is spent not in regret, guilt, fear or anger, but in wisdom, understanding and love.

_Jennifer Edwards_

It is life itself that must be our practice. It is not enough to hear spiritual truth or even to have your own spiritual insights. Every aspect of what happens to us must become part of a learning experience.

_Unknown_

The purpose of learning is growth, and our minds, unlike our bodies, can continue growing as we continue to live.

_Mortimer Adler_

give you counsel on important issues; having mastered the art and discipline of asking profound questions; and being fully committed to a lifelong pursuit of wisdom. 

Blanchard and Miller maintain that a leader’s capacity to GROW determines their capacity to lead! Further, improving yourself as a leader is crucial in seeking to improve and serve your organisation. Interestingly, it appears that in most organisations the best leaders choose to serve others. Servant leaders are normally those whose goals are focused on the greater good. In _The Secret: What Great Leaders Know and Do_, Blanchard and Miller offer a helpful description of the ways in which a leader can SERVE. They utilise the acronym SERVE to highlight key leader behaviours:

S = Seeing the Future – Servant leaders envision and communicate a compelling picture of the future. Leading always begins with a picture of a preferred future.

E = Engaging and Developing Others – Servant leaders recruit and select the right people for the right job while creating an environment where people wholeheartedly invest themselves in achieving the vision.

R = Reinventing Continuously – Servant leaders possess a never-ending focus on improvement. Progress is impossible without change.

V = Valuing Results and Relationships – Servant leaders generate positive, measurable results, and cultivate great relationships with those they lead. Ultimate success always includes people and performance.

E = Embodying the Values – Servant leaders live in a fashion consistent with their stated values. People learn more from what a leader does than from what a leader says.

Your willingness to keep learning as a Church leader can make a powerful statement to your entire Church organisation. A Church leader learns more lessons when mistakes are made than when successes come easily. Consequently, as a Church leader you should have a heightened realisation that you are not invincible or irreplaceable. The reality is that one day you will leave your current Church organisation. When you do, will your Church organisation be in a substantially better place than it was before you inherited it?

To improve, grow and serve your Church organisation you need to continue improving and growing yourself. An improving, growing and serving Church leader chooses to empower and inspire people to align with a greater purpose in order to improve and grow their Church organisation. Remember the story of the donkey – the day you (or your Church organisation) stops learning becomes the day you (or your Church organisation) may start dying!


3 _Great Leaders Grow_, p. 119.
TO THINK ABOUT...

**Moses’ First Forty Years in the Desert**

But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian... Then Moses was content to live with the man, and he gave Zipporah his daughter to Moses.  
*Exodus 2:15,21*

How did God prepare Moses to be His man to lead the Hebrews out of Egyptian bondage? He prepared him not in a day, but over time, not through an event, but with a process. God also led others through a lengthy leadership development process:

- **Noah** – waited 120 years before the predicted rains arrived.
- **Abraham** – waited 25 years for a promised son.
- **Joseph** – waited 14 years in prison for a crime he didn’t commit.
- **Job** – waited perhaps a lifetime, 60-70 years, for God’s justice.

God prepares leaders in a slow-cooker, not in a microwave oven. More important than the awaited goal is the work God does in us while we wait. Waiting deepens and matures us, levels our perspective, and broadens our understanding. Tests of time determine whether we can endure seasons of seemingly unfruitful preparations, and indicate whether we can recognize and seize the opportunities that come our way.

And there is nothing more calculated to energise the mind, and strengthen the intellect, than the study of the Word of God. No other book is so potent to elevate the thoughts, to give vigour to the faculties, as the broad, ennobling truths of the Bible. If God’s word were studied as it should be, men would have a breadth of mind, a nobility of character, and stability of purpose, that is rarely seen in these times.

*Ellen G White, FCE 126 (R&H, 7/17/88)*