I vividly remember a conversation I had many years ago in 1974, which marked a turning point in my leadership journey. I was sitting at a Holiday Inn with my friend, Kurt Campmeyer, when he asked me if I had a personal growth plan. I didn't. In fact, I didn't even know you were supposed to have one.

Up until that point, the best term for my growth would be “accidental growth.” I didn't grow on purpose, but I loved people and worked hard so that I caught a few things along the way.

That night with Kurt, I realized that to grow like I wanted, my personal development couldn't be hit-and-miss. I needed to initiate and activate. I made a decision to devote myself to personal growth. I literally made personal growth my personal mission.

In my book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, I talk about the Law of Process, which says, “Leaders develop daily, not in a day.” Our natural inclination is to overestimate the event and underestimate the process. We wait for a special occasion or an intense experience to boost our growth instead of appreciating the process. In the words of my friend Kevin Myers: “Everyone is looking for a quick fix, but what they really need is fitness.”

We don't mature momentarily, but over the long-term. As we continue on our quest to become more skillful as leaders, let's look at seven statements about the growth process.

1. **Growth is not automatic.** Paul Harvey said it best: “You can tell you're on the road to success; it's uphill all the way.” You can't coast uphill. Growth doesn't happen by itself; it requires an active investment of time.

   Earl Nightengale said, "If you'll spend one hour a day, every day for five years on a given subject, within five years you'll become an expert on that subject." In 1974, I made that decision—to set aside one hour per day for personal growth. Over thirty years later, I find that the more I learn and grow, the more precious that hour is to me.

2. **Growth is the great separator between those who succeed and those who do not.** When I see a person beginning to separate themselves from the pack, it's almost always due to personal growth. As Bennis & Nanus say, "It is the capacity to develop and improve their skills that distinguishes leaders from followers."

   When I went to college, there was no gap between me and my peers, none at all. Since 1974, I have diligently followed through on my commitment to grow an hour every day, and now the gap, in most cases, is wide. Am I smarter than my former classmates? Not at all. Many of them danced circles around me academically. The growth factor—my long-term commitment to personal development—made the difference.

3. **Growth takes time, and only time can reveal certain lessons to us.** We've all heard, “Experience is the best teacher,” but it never has been and never will be. *Evaluated* experience is the best teacher. Reflective thinking is required to turn experience into insight. If you're a young LW subscriber without a wealth of personal experience, borrow the experience. Ask questions, listen, and learn from a successful leader that has gone before you.

4. **The more we grow, the more we know we need to grow.** In other words, when you start developing yourself, instead of feeling wise, you'll be struck by how much you don't know. Alvin
Toffler, in *Future Shock*, once observed, “The illiterate of the future are not those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.”

5. **Growth equals change.** To develop, we must step away from comfort and welcome fresh and challenging experiences. Growth demands a temporary surrender of security. It may mean giving up familiar but limiting patterns, safe but unrewarding work, values no longer believed in, and relationships that have lost their meaning.

6. **Growth inside fuels growth outside.** The highest reward of our toil is not what we get for it, but what we become by it. At the age of 17, I decided to read extensively, file my favorite articles, and prepare lessons. Little did I realize that out of the simple discipline of reading, filing, and preparing lessons, I would receive content, develop creativity, begin to speak, and eventually author numerous books.

7. **Choose to grow in the areas of your strengths, not in the areas of your weakness.** There are only four things I do well, just four, and I focus exclusively on them. I lead, communicate, create, and network. That’s it. I spend all of my time on one of those four strength zones. The secret of successful people lies in their ability to discover their strengths and to organize their life so that these strengths can be applied.

Benjamin Franklin personifies the spirit of inventiveness of the modern world. His accomplishments read like an almanac of greatness:

Inventor; poet; philosopher; pamphleteer; distinguished member of three national academies of science; America’s first Postmaster General; founder of Philadelphia’s first police force, lending library, and the academy later to become the University of Pennsylvania; founder of the first fire insurance company; delegate to the Constitutional Convention; Drafter of the Declaration of Independence; one of America’s most effective statesmen and ambassadors.

Yet for all of his achievements, the epitaph that Franklin wrote for himself simply reads, "Here lies the body of Ben Franklin, printer."

In honoring his humble roots as a printer’s apprentice, Benjamin Franklin reveals the mystery to his greatness. It was in the world of printing where Franklin was first exposed to new books, writers, and ideas. His fame, accomplishments, and accolades would never have been possible without the love of learning and habits of growth imprinted in his life during his early days as a printer.

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