

The Magic 3 of Leadership Development

By Seth Kahan

There are three activities that make the difference for those leaders who consistently rise to the top when it comes to career, salary, and impact. The *Magic 3*, as I like to call them, are (1) transformative experience, (2) peer exchange, and (3) strategic reflection. Below I explain each one and give you things you can do for each.

I have served as an executive advisor to CEOs since 2000 and led my own CEO Peer Groups for over five years. In these roles I have sat in on hundreds of hours of CEOs talking about what is helping them and what is holding them back. It is clear *those who prioritize their professional development are the same leaders who have great careers*, no matter how you measure it.

The difference is stark. There are leaders who rise to the top quickly and powerfully, moving from one organization to the next, each involving greater responsibility, often a bigger salary, and always leading greater positive impact in the world. And then there are those who seem to sit where they are longer than they want with no real plan or method for getting to the next stage of their career. The former have a game plan. The latter are usually lost. The game plan is The Magic 3.

The Magic 3

Transformative Experience

The greatest asset every leader has is their own experience, and by extension their understanding of how the world works and what they can do to influence it. The best way to increase your options and skills is to participate in new experiences that open up horizons by transforming your mind.

Go for those that challenge your limitations, push you to new insights and force you to develop new competencies. They often pitch you outside your comfort zone, which means that you feel anxious, awkward and discombobulated. Nobody likes those feelings, but strong leaders recognize it requires crossing the threshold of comfort when it comes to building their personal leadership capacity.

What kinds of limitations do you go after? Whatever is holding you back! If you feel slammed for time, you may need to develop new skills for getting more than done *without* threatening your self-care time or family life. Or, if all your projects seem mundane in terms of their impact, you may need to develop your own project that is ambitious, bold, and audacious.

Three Ideas for Transformative Experience

1. Volunteer to serve for a cause that is close to your heart. Take on an important role and make it a priority to deliver results that exceed expectations.

2. Work on a project that has a greater scope than anything you have ever participated in before. Look for something that is literally daunting, and commit to extraordinary success.
3. Write a book. Pick a subject you care deeply about and learn how to map its territory in ways will be helpful to others.

Peer Exchange

My CEO Peer Groups involve 4-8 CEOs who meet six times over the course of a year or so. Five of the meetings are four hours long and one is an overnight held out of town. During this time these leaders get to know each other in deeply personal ways. They help each other reveal and address personal weaknesses, get out of tough spots, and brainstorm new initiatives,. There is nothing like it.

All leadership is personal. It begins deep inside where we find the resources to grow and contribute, over and over again, getting up one more time than we are knocked down. Sitting face-to-face with another on the same path as you is invaluable. There is a unique vulnerability and ability to provide meaningful support that cannot be found anywhere else.

You never know what you are going to face when you take on a leadership position. Some of the circumstances that reveal themselves can be overwhelmingly intimidating. These could include organizational politics, financial emergencies, breakdowns with strategic partners, market changes or all four mixed together in a potentially lethal package. Facing such a challenge can be too much for one soul. That's when peers who understand the realities of your circumstances can be one of the most valuable assets in the world.

Three Ways to Create a Peer Exchange

1. Join a group that is formed for this purpose. I am forming such a group now for Rising Stars in associations. You can go to this link to learn more: bit.ly/VLacademy.
2. Form your own group. Pull together several colleagues and create a program to help and support each other in raising the bar on your performance, positioning each of you for career success.
3. Keep an eye out for others in a similar role as you and invite them out to talk. Ask them what their biggest wins are and what they are doing to get ahead. Share the same.

Strategic Reflection

This applies to both transformative action and peer exchange. It brings the insight and application that turns your experience and learning into action. Strategic reflection brings everything together.

Let's break this down. *Strategic* means framing your reflection so it focuses on your leadership development. Ask questions like,

- *What did I learn from this that can make me a better leader?*
- *Is there something here that will teach me to generate better results?*

- *What patterns do I see that I can learn from when it comes to innovation, finding the way, or helping others perform better?*

Reflection is any activity that allows you to step outside of yourself and get a handle on your performance from a different point of view. Some of my favorite reflection activities are:

- Writing in my journal
- Talking to a good friend
- Talking into the voice recorder on my smart phone

Three Methods of Strategic Reflection

1. Pull out your calendar and go through all the events that you participated in over the last year. Write them up and categorize them by which were your favorites and which taught you the most. Review the list and think about how you can improve it in the year ahead.

2. Make a list of the way you spend your time, every day, week and month. Find the regular activities as well as those that are unplanned. Review them with an eye to achieving your professional goals. See if there are patterns you are especially satisfied with, or hold you back. Give good thought to what you can do to improve.

3. Meet some colleagues for a meal and share (a) your professional goals, (b) your plans for achieving them, and (c) the realities of execution, good and bad. Make a commitment to improving your performance and helping your fellows do the same.

Make a commitment to your own development. That is the seed from which all great careers grow.

Seth Kahan is an executive advisor and leadership expert. He has worked with over 100 association CEOs on strategy and innovation. To learn about his upcoming Visionary Leadership Academy, visit bit.ly/VLacademy