

## *What's Growing Ourselves Got to Do with Growing Our Business?*

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During the past six years that I've rejoiced working in the field of performance development, I've become more and more intrigued by the fact that the link between business growth and personal growth can so easily fall outside the repertoire of most leaders. In this chapter, I will talk about some observations and insights that help me understand this phenomenon as well as some thoughts on how I see performance coaching making an impact on executives who are willing to explore this link.

According to a survey by the Conference Board, an American business research association, "sustained and steady growth" is at the top of the list of America's CEOs concerns. Business growth is seen as the ultimate success parameter, more than ever before, shifting the attention of executives from saving costs and improving margins to creating new markets, products, customers. Consequently, companies with a sustainable track record in growth and the ideas and executions that got them there are the key features of many articles and interviews. However, while most of the "magic" is attributed to new insights, breakthrough ideas, clever executions and change projects, it is almost unheard of that a CEO talks about the personal development (growth) he/she went through while trying to find their swing in leading the business to growth.

Tom Peters says: "To make a mark on the outside, a company needs soul, spirit, character and personality on the inside." A company is its employees and if growth is the mark then there needs to be a direct link between the growth of a business and that of its leaders and managers.

When we think a business is "stuck," it usually means that we hold, in our minds, a picture of what's possible in its current market or industry and we are bound by the limitations of that picture. In fact, being able to breakthrough these limitations is what leads to new business creation and growth. No business is ever the same if it sustains its new territory long enough to actually bump into totally new limitations. How amazingly similar to what an individual experiences on his/her path to growth!

### **The Disconnect At Play**

Just think of a business that produces extraordinary results, resets industry success metrics through its rapid growth; a business which marries solid strategy and systems with a way of doing business where both individuals and teams operate at their best; where there is a strong sense of purpose that drives people beyond the comfort of a pay-check; where business growth is an opportunity, a way to actualize individual dreams.

Is this an excerpt from a corporate story book, or could it be real? For many of us, it is a remote possibility or even worse, a naïve vision. What would sound more real is that we often witness our business getting stuck in declining markets, enslaved to sharply rising costs and to altered customer behaviors. As we reluctantly agree to the next year's business plan, committing to a

growth target that we can't even conceive wipes away any possible excitement or confidence we might have developed so far. Knowing no savvy leader would dare to question the need to grow the business, we go ahead and plunge into the soothing comfort of being in action: running innovation workshops, setting up project teams, building plans. Our staff meeting speeches emphasize how much drive, commitment and resilience is needed to deliver on the plans and that we need to act with courage in order to reach our growth targets. There is a wave of energy in the room and people leave with a sense of liberation ("I am not the only one thinking it is going to be tough") and some kind of curious hopefulness ("everything's going to change and we will make it"). After all, we just had our restructuring, revised our business strategy and designed a new organizational structure. So we should get there, right? Maybe...

I want to assert that, beyond these obvious - and required - steps, growth of a business requires an attitude adjustment. Those who are the key players in the leadership game need to reinvent themselves while rethinking the business.

In fact, the "new age wisdom" of the business world already focuses, more than ever, on growing leadership. And yet, acknowledgement of the causality between business growth and personal growth seems to be restricted to training rooms, leadership conferences and intellectual debates. I am often intrigued by the disconnect between these two concepts, especially at times when the business is under severe pressure to perform. I remember a company chairman actually saying this to me: "We will definitely look into our leadership capacities and how we work together but right now, my first priority is to hit my annual plan. Then, we can take some time and look into what we need as an organization." Another indication of the disconnect is the reluctance of top

executives to work with a performance coach, to admit it when they do, and to share their personal growth goals or the experience and transformation they went through.

### **Personal Growth: a Soft Concept Serving the Hard End of Performance**

Most of us believe that our analytical capacity, sharpness and logic are our primary assets and that if we are good enough, they will clear our heads as well as our way to the top. And yes, clarity and speed of thinking gets us noticed, and helps us fly high. Yet, as long as we are unaware of what emotional - and mostly automatic - responses drive our choices, we can't break through them when they don't work for us. We end up with dry logic and acid leadership – and we get stuck in the ranks.

Any successful business achievement could in fact be tracked down to a moment in time, when a team or a person has made a choice or taken an action. Apart from professional skills, that person or team's beliefs, attitude and world view have an undeniable impact on the quality of that choice or decision. This is not to deny the power of our intellect but to assert that to use it effectively, we need to be at our best. (By best, I mean emotionally cleverest.) Getting to that wisdom requires first an awareness of what is so, what pushes our buttons, what unproductive responses, limitations and competing intentions we have. We then can look at our ambitions, restate what we want and chose what behavioral shifts we want to achieve to get there. The resulting work can alter the substance of how we lead, beyond a mere change in form. This is how a soft concept like personal growth can stand right at the hard end of performance.

## **The Gift of Discomfort**

When the execution of big ideas is slow and clumsy, when board meetings are mostly spent on status reviews, when issues persist despite many projects, when the impact of the “team building day” or the “off-site meeting” fades out in weeks, there is clearly a performance issue. And yet, I have often observed in my first contact with top executives that they see the performance of their team/organization somewhat (or in some cases totally) independent from their own capabilities – if only their team members would be more responsible, more committed, more visionary. Change is often mentioned in these talks as something that their people have to go through.

What are these smart and able leaders not wanting to see and why not? What’s missing as an approach? The answer I suggest lies in the discomfort we human beings feel as soon as we start suspecting we might not be perfect and that we will be dangerously dangling on the edge of our limitations if we ever want to go for a significant challenge.

The resulting resistance keeps most leaders away from grabbing opportunities for self-development; instead, they choose blaming the market conditions and the lack of skills in their people for the stagnating business results. Paradoxically, this experience of discomfort when confronted with self-challenge could in fact be the spark of awareness, pointing to the hidden need or growth edge which, if seized as an opportunity (rather than a problem) could prove to be a gift.

## **Supporting Growth Through Performance Coaching**

We can all think of moments when we witnessed a breakthrough idea hitting our Board Room or a totally new opportunity emerging almost from nowhere in a project meeting. What was different? Where did the sharpness come from? How did we start seeing a business target as a challenging opportunity and no more an obligation? How come we stopped wanting to be right and started supporting someone else's clever idea instead? Where did the stress go? How could we already see how we could grow our turnover in a year's time to an unprecedented rate? How did we get to our best? Could we recreate that day?

Being there is not magic but possibly the result of some collective and individual work leading to that level of alignment, purposeful action and creativity. To get on that path, the challenge is to get curious enough to discover more about ourselves and humble enough to accept support.

Among many forms of professional, organized support, I believe coaching is the most practical road to growing the business. Coaching can significantly accelerate the process for individuals and teams to see new possibilities, articulate an ambition, choose what they want to work on to get there and use the business context to frame this work.

## **Building Clarity of What Is So**

To set out on the road to personal development, all we need to know is what we really want, why we want that and what blocks us. This is where it gets tricky: we are blind to many of our qualities, as well as to our dysfunctional behaviors and limiting beliefs. Being smart is not enough unless we have surrounded ourselves with support. Many of the leaders I have worked with would talk enthusiastically about what's missing in their team and how they want them to

behave differently but would rarely mention a word about their own limitations. Likewise, they would not necessarily know their own unique strengths that could be relied on at times of trouble or discomfort.

Getting to know ourselves is not that difficult. As we can't really see ourselves, we just need others' eyes to do that for us. However, not many of us are comfortable with asking for feedback, nor are we trained to welcome and process what we hear. For most leaders, asking for feedback is a rare act of courage unless they are sure they will like what they will hear. On the other hand, giving feedback is often used as a way of dumping our judgments onto others and rarely seen as a gift we give to someone we care about. Consequently, people often fall in the trap of wanting to please or look good and thus avoid telling the truth about what they are seeing. The coach, however, through confidential and trusting conversations, can gather data about the person from this outside world, from subordinates, fellow team members and bosses. The coach would also help the person grasp insights, patterns, and beliefs and frame the issue and therefore the opportunity, in light of what's possible.

### **Choosing and Committing to a Purpose**

The next challenge is whether we really want to stretch ourselves and hold the discomfort of playing in an unfamiliar field. That field can sometimes be as simple as learning to listen when we have mostly been talking in an urge to inspire, or accepting that there may be more than one way of doing it right when we tend to convince others that our way is best. What will ease that discomfort is the notion of purpose. Personal growth may be too abstract to keep the person focused. The coach could help the person articulate a challenge and find an exciting purpose to

aim for, one that will make a big difference to his/her business results. The mere fact that a coach is hired already says that the challenge involved is pretty big. To match that challenge, there needs to be a strong commitment from the player that will help her/him stay in the game when times get tough. The coach will look for that commitment that will anchor the leader.

### **Learning through Practice**

Growing the self, by learning to act with purpose, commitment, responsibility and courage can be as difficult as growing a business in a stagnant economy and yet, it sounds less concrete, soft, and therefore less important. Words around personal growth and leadership are spoken so very often as part of inspirational speeches, leadership development programs and team building events that they lose their ability to evoke curiosity in our minds. What we miss is a true experience of these abstract concepts to give us a concrete picture of how they could serve us in creating and growing businesses.

There are many ways to get to try new ways that will help us achieve more, and coaching is only one of them. However, when sustained performance and learning is the objective then coaching can be much more effective than being advised or mentored as it will help with intensifying practices and turning them into habits. The coach helps the person dare to look at what works and what does not, to see more options and to practice, thus stretching her/his abilities beyond current limitations. The feedback loop becomes the compass and guides the journey. Despite your commitment, if the rest of your Board of Directors was not enrolled into your business idea, the coaching session will take you beyond blaming others or your self-accusations and help you nail

down what drove that outcome and what was missing. New ways of dealing with similar situations will emerge from that blend of encouragement and challenge the coach brings.

### **Gaining Affinity for Growth**

Soon, new patterns of thinking become new habits of the leader's mind that later on will, with or without a coach in the process, open up the leader's perspective on getting things done through others and creating collectively. Furthermore, when we experiment and innovate new ways of being, when our team/business responds rapidly, when we can see changes in our business results, we often discover a new pleasure fueled by feeling awake, purposeful, and powerful through personal discovery and growth. That often leads to an affinity for further growth. We are launched on a new path.

On the other hand, I have at times seen that this experience coupled with the wonderful comfort of finding a safe, trusted, intelligent and caring ally in the coach can drive executives to a latent dependency towards their coach. It is therefore crucial to make sure that the coach leaves the leader with skills and ability to deepen awareness, to ask powerful questions, to look for feedback and support when in need, and to sustain personal growth without the continuous help of a coach. This is the ultimate test for real learning and growth.

## **A Last Word**

It can be amazingly refreshing and productive for a leader to have a brand new and courageous perspective on what it takes to move a business to growth -- considering yourself as a project in service of the growth you want to create in your business. It will be a process of discovering, choosing and learning, taking you on a ride, transforming the way you lead, and potentially touching your other relationships: with your kids, your partner, and your friends!

Your capacity to produce is increased! That is personal growth; that is being at your best, at the hard end of business performance...

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