

CHAPTER 14: SELF IMPROVING

To Improve the Team, Improve Yourself

John Maxwell takes as an illustration of self-improvement the story of how Nokia became the world's producer of cell phones. The company was begun in the mid-1860s, as a small pulp and paper mill. The business struggled until the founder's groundwood pulp won a prize at 1867 World's Fair. Soon, sales were firmly established throughout Europe and two more mills were added. About thirty years later, the company decided to diversify and partnered with Finnish Rubber Works. The companies continued to do well and in 1922, they bought a controlling share of Finnish Cable Works. Though they continued in forest and rubber industries, their sales were driven by the demand for cable, as technology increased the need for such things as power cables, telephone lines, telephone equipment.

Then, the hundred year old company, now a huge conglomerate began losing money. About that time, 1990, a young executive asked to take over an unprofitable division: mobile-phones. Jorma Ollila was so successful at turning this division around that he was made president and CEO of the company in 1992.

Ollila met his next challenge, turning the entire company around, with a two headed approach. Believing that the company's greatest potential lay in communications technology, he began divesting other interests. Second, he realized that for a technology company, human resources were more important than natural resources. Ollila says that today "The technology cycles are shorter. We must build on our discontinuities and turn them into our favor."

Ollila is a person who believes in constant self-renewal and he has made his personal goal of self-improvement the corporate goal as well. "Continuous learning entitles everyone at Nokia to develop themselves and find ways to improve their performance," says Ollila. "And what's true for the individual is just as true for the whole company." To improve the team, improve the individuals on the team. Ollila's philosophy of individual self-improvement helped turn Nokia into a \$20 billion global telecommunications system. Ollila believes that there is no other company ". . . better planned than we are to tackle the next paradigm."

Fleshing It Out

Maxwell observes that in our society people are looking for a fix. They want to "arrive" and retire. What we really need is to be in a state of fitness, to be ready face whatever challenges they should meet. The Nokia people are always self-improving, and are therefore ready to face new situations. "People who are constantly improving themselves make three processes an ongoing cycle in their lives:"

1. Preparation

Self-improving team members think about what they can do to improve themselves in the present, not in some far off future. They look for today's potential learning moments, and they seize them. At the end of day, they think about what they have learned and what they need to learn more about tomorrow. In this way, they become deliberate and continuing learners, which prepares them for challenges.

2. Contemplation

People who have greatly influenced the world have spent considerable amount of time alone -- contemplating, meditating, and listening. "Time alone is essential to self-improvement." It allows us to evaluate our actions, to make adjustments where they are needed, and to plan for improved future action based on what was learned in the past.

3. Application

Now is the time to start applying what you have learned; don't keep putting off that difficult change. Maxwell says change generally comes when: 1) people hurt enough that they have to, 2) they learn enough that they want to, and 3) they receive enough that they are able to. The goal is to keep learning so that you want to change for the better daily.

Bringing It Home

To become self-improving . . .

- become highly teachable; learn to listen and adopt the attitude of a learner, not an expert;
- plan your progress. Adopt two levels of learning. First, choose an area that you want to improve and select books, lectures, conferences, experts to speak to in the coming months. Second, create learning moments each day so that you learn something new everyday.
- value self-improvement above self-promotion: "Make your next career move based on how it will improve you personally rather than how it will enhance you financially."

Daily Take-Away

Maxwell concludes the chapter with an anecdote about the great aviator, Charles Lindbergh. He says that Lindbergh's historic solo flight across the Atlanta was not a solo endeavor. It took the collaboration of others to make it happen. But, when it was time for the pilot to make his thirty-three hour flight, he was ready. A friend of his tells a story that shows that Lindbergh had begun years earlier "just practicing" staying awake all night so that he would be ready when the opportunity to make that monumental flight presented itself. We all have much "practicing" to do to be ready when our big moment comes.

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