

What else  
might I do?  
*Focussing on  
past success may  
stand in the way  
of your potential*

by Herminia Ibarra

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The more successful we are, the more vulnerable we become to limiting mindsets in how we define not just our work, but even more importantly ourselves. Success limits potential. And it's hard to get out of such traps because the alternatives are rarely clear and the stakes are high.

Why do some people continually grow and blossom as leaders, rising to ever more challenging opportunities, while equally talented colleagues languish year after year in jobs they can do in their sleep? My research into how people reinvent themselves at work has provided some clear answers to this question. Most are laden with paradox.

For example, success in whatever we are doing right now can actually work against fulfilling our potential. Why? People tend to repeat what they become very good at. We give our established strengths priority because they give us confidence we will realize the envisioned results. Conversely, because we tend not to invest our energies in doing things we cannot currently do well, we never become proficient enough in those new pursuits to dispel our belief that, for us, those activities are a waste of time. Managers who advance in their careers primarily by excelling at operational work, for example, go on doing operational work long after they could delegate those duties to other people. Such managers stay so busy asking themselves, "How can I do what I do better?" that they leave themselves little time to ask, "What else might I do?" The problem is not that we cannot learn new skills and continually develop our talents – which of course is the essence of fulfilling our potential. The problem is that we fail to grasp the full value of trying new things.

This mindset, though persistent, has never been less practical. Business environments today are rapidly and radically evolving, which in turn continually changes the roles leaders are called on to play, even when their formal job titles and responsibilities remain the same. The result? Many people are get-

ting better and better at doing the wrong job, because they have not actively adapted their job concept to changing demands. Even if you are in the rare position where change in the environment matters little, focusing too heavily on what has made you successful in the past can keep you from rising to new, more impactful and fulfilling roles in the future. The kiss of death to potential is defining our objectives as increments to our past performance, without realizing that completely new goals are always in order.

### *Act first, then think*

How should you set new goals? Richard Pascale sagely observed, "Adults are more likely to act their way into a new way of thinking than to think their way into a new way of acting." If you have ever been plunged into a new role where you were asked to do something entirely unfamiliar to you, you know Pascale was right. Learning to meet those unprecedented demands likely changed you more tangibly and profoundly than you could have even imagined by merely sitting and thinking. Experience, much more than reflection, holds the power to reshape our image of the world, of what we can do, and of what is worth doing. Yet when setting goals, most people default to introspection, an approach that inherently limits one's view of their true potential.

If you would prefer to grow in leaps and bounds, let introspection follow action. First, put yourself in new settings and interact with very different kinds of people. Allow those freshly challenging experiences and outcomes to transform the habitual patterns of thought that currently define your limits. Then set new goals.

### *Seek "outsight"*

A large body of research shows that most of us, left to our own devices, tend to have inbred networks. We naturally prefer to work with people we already know, to bounce our ideas off the usual suspects, and to mistrust or ignore the views of those outside our trusted circle. As part of "The Leadership Transition," an executive education program I teach at INSEAD, I ask each participant to complete a network diagnostic that identifies who they regularly speak with and turn to for advice. Year in and year out, this diagnostic shows participants are interacting almost exclusively with people who can help them do the job they do today, but with almost no one who might stretch them to reinvent their job and themselves, and thus fulfill much more of their potential.

After the network diagnostic drives this truth home, I encourage the executives to actively seek “outsight” – fresh external perspectives they have never heard before – to significantly broaden their strategic perspective. The reality is, you can only gain a strategic sense of your evolving and future place in the world by moving beyond familiar, comfortable boundaries to trade ideas with people who come at the issues you face (and may soon face) from completely different points of view.

### *Dare not to be excellent*

Broadening your professional network takes courage. Subjecting yourself to challenges where your past achievements provide no source of confidence takes even more. Will you dare not to be excellent?

Being an excellent performer in whatever you currently do is, of course, very important. But we know from research that when you focus too exclusively on meeting your current goals, you mostly do what you know you are good at, although those abilities are not necessarily what will be required of you in the next role or in a changing environment. The alternative? Make room in your daily priorities not just to hit each goal on the nose, but to also give yourself room to experiment in areas where you have not yet proven yourself competent. Some familiar tactics include getting involved in industry organizations, volunteering for community service work that does not leverage your established strengths (e.g., if you are an accountant, try fundraising), or joining a cross-functional team at work. But why stop there? Stretch further. When you immerse yourself in situations where no one has preconceptions about who you are and what you can or cannot do, you are free to try out different versions of yourself. Each new context is a blank slate. At times you will struggle and even fail. But what you learn about yourself and your hidden abilities will open your eyes. The effect will then compound. New experiences will change how you see yourself, which in turn makes you more inclined to seek new kinds of opportunities that can further transform you. You will find yourself continually looking anew, without blinders, at what you actually can and want to contribute. Only then are you ready to set new goals.

By seeking “outsight” and daring not to be excellent, you change goal-setting from a rite of annual reflection to a continuous process of reaching ever higher, based on the knowledge and confidence one can only gain through rich and varied experiential learning.

### *Free more leaders*

When viewed through the lens offered above, it is easy to see that many organizations unknowingly hinder leaders’ growth. The goal of most leadership development efforts is to help leaders identify and leverage their core strengths. Positive performance reviews, pay raises, the next promotion, and the sense of fulfillment and security that come with such things are all keyed to how rigorously leaders focus on and meet current objectives.

That is certainly an effective way to drive superior individual and organizational performance. But what of realizing potential? The process described above entails continuous rethinking. Rethinking your job. Rethinking your self. Rethinking your goals. All the time, and all at once. That is hard to do, even without systems and bosses explicitly urging you to stick to the script. As developing leaders start broadening their networks and seek the new experiences they need to rethink effectively, they often feel inauthentic. An inner voice objects: “I’m not a schmoozer who goes around trying to know everyone.” Or, “Sure, working directly with customers sounds interesting. But I know I fit best behind the scenes.” Our established sense of who we are, personally and professionally, can form quite a rigid protection against meaningful personal and professional growth.

Many organizations, to their credit, work hard to help high-potential leaders break free of such false limits by rotating executives through varied roles. Rising executives may be thrust into multiple functions and geographies, asked to tackle both line management and staff roles, or challenged to lead in a matrix organization where they have limited direct authority. At their best, such rotations force developing leaders into new networks, new interactions, and new discoveries, which in turn frees up and expands those leaders’ thought patterns and self concept. Yet only relatively few developing leaders have access to that level of radical new experience. Most leaders spend the vast majority of their time doing whatever they do best, and little else. When organizations recognize this reality, they should ask



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themselves: “How much potential are we leaving on the table?”

Mentoring programs could also do much more to help developing leaders fulfill their potential. Many mentors, believing their role is limited to helping mentees identify and leverage known strengths, take a narrow view. They encourage mentees to understand their “style” and “what you want to do,” then map the specific, linear steps the mentee must take to get there. Rare is the mentor who urges mentees to repeatedly plunge themselves into the unknown. It seems that successful senior people often forget what they experienced on the way up – especially the times they were in far over their heads, and all they learned while finding their way through.

Charting a career path based on one’s known strengths is, without question, vitally important. Yet mentors can also help mentees realize more of their potential with challenging questions that push them outside their comfort zones: “How is the job you’re doing now changing?” “What are you doing to adapt?” “What are you doing that is completely new to you?” “Who do you pay attention to, and why?” “Do you have all the information you need to see the larger picture of what is happening in your job? Our business? Our industry? The world?” Mentors can help their charges understand what it really means to build an effective network, and encourage them to continually venture into challenging new contexts. When more mentors believe that actively fulfilling one’s own potential is not something “extra,” but rather an essential part of every developing leader’s current job, more mentees will grow into strategically alert, well rounded, confident executive leaders.

### *Take charge of your potential*

In today’s resource-constrained era, much of the burden of developing leadership potential has shifted from the organization to the individual. Smaller budgets, fewer programs, greater pressure to deliver results now, diminished job security, and less free time all seemingly conspire to keep us from exploring who we can be and from discovering all we might do.

At the same time, the environments in which we work increasingly confront us with the possibility (and often, the reality) of radical change. Simply plugging along in our current roles as if tomorrow will look exactly like today may feel like the safe course, but when viewed from any objective perspective, we see that it is actually quite dangerous.

If you cannot stand still and your organization offers you limited opportunities for exploration and growth, what can you do? There is only one answer. Take charge of your potential. Recognize that major transitions in your role do not always come neatly labeled with a new job title. Stay alert and attuned to your environment. Widen your networks to hone your strategic oversight. Place yourself in completely new contexts where you will find the freedom to learn who you truly can be as a leader. Let yourself go where you don’t know exactly what will happen or how to succeed. See what happens.

That takes effort as well as courage. But if you don’t fulfill your potential as a leader, who will?