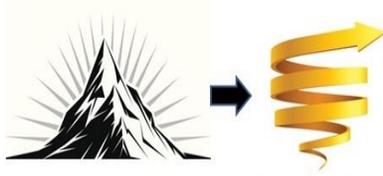


## Leadership Development In-the-Moment



Early in my career, I believed that becoming an outstanding leader is like steady progress to a mountaintop—with enough skills, you eventually just *know* what to do.

I discovered the journey is a lot messier than that.

For example, in one moment I looked very skilled as I resolved a tough conflict in a way that made everyone feel included. The next moment, I looked unskilled as I allowed an angry team to provoke me to giving an abrupt, authoritarian directive rather than first carefully listening.

### **The primary challenge of development is using the skills we already have.**

Such experiences led me to see development as a *spiral* of continual learning—applying the same skills but in different ways in ever more varied, complex, and difficult situations. The core issue is not as much *what* to learn as it is *how* to learn in real-time and as quickly as possible.

This led to two more important realizations. First, human situations rarely have just one right assessment or action. I had better results when I allowed for uncertainty and error. Second, all of us are at risk for being pulled at times by stress back down the spiral into unproductive reactions. Blind spots for this are very common. With that angry team, I was initially blind to my own reactivity. By accepting my error, I could actually improve my relationship with the team.

### **Immediate impact is the aim.**

As I found my way as a leader, I sought the best ideas from psychology, organizational development, adult learning, and improvement science to define principles and methods for development “in-the-moment”—using any situation to learn and get results at the same time.

The basic approach is relatively simple. Instead of just reacting to situations, take time for assessment, thinking of options, choosing actions, and learning from results. Such before-and-after reflection eventually improves thinking and action *in the midst of* situations.

Though the approach is simple, deliberate and steady practice is required to do it well especially under stress. The practice has multiple facets. For example, one aim is steady improvement of the balance between taking time to think versus taking action. Another aim is steady integration of evidence-based principles for effective interventions in complex systems.

### **Make assessments and plan actions based on key guiding principles.**

Based on strong evidence and experience, the principles below offer a crucial foundation for the best results. Over 30 years of work, I have also developed additional layers of principles and concepts to address interpersonal and organizational complexities. Ideas from other leadership frameworks can be easily integrated as well if desired.

## Snapshot of key guiding principles for leadership development in-the-moment.

- **To focus actions, orient to both *results and the aim of high quality relationships*.**

Tough situations may lead to doubt and questions like “What other competencies do I need to learn?” This question has its place but, *in real-time work*, a focus on what immediate impact is needed in a situation enables more clarity, more effective action, and productive learning.

Impact means results but strong evidence indicates the best results, sustainability, and resilience happen through high quality relationships. So, the key question is “*What does this situation call for to enable progress to results and to develop high quality relationships?*”

The nature of “high quality relationships” needs to be translated into concrete, actionable behaviors by each leader, team, and organization. For example, compare “create trust” to the more concrete “everyone should feel their opinions are heard by checking for understanding.”

- **Always consider and address potential blind spots and reactivity in oneself and others.**

Even after 30 years, I still can leap to faulty assumptions and unproductive actions under stress. I still have blind spots. One reliable sign of such reactivity is the question “What is wrong with these people and why don’t they do what I want?” Instead, assume that you already are in some degree of reactivity and ask “*How am I contributing to these problems?*”

- **Learn the way to success through taking action.**

It is hard to know for sure how well a given action will work. The aim is just-enough-assessment in order to act and learn what works and what doesn’t. The question is not “How can I avoid mistakes?” but “*What can I learn from failures to adjust course and try again?*”

- **Assure two-way feedback, especially across power differentials.**

With so much stress and the high risks for blind spots and reactivity, frequent feedback to adjust course is crucial. No one can be immune from the behavioral expectations for high quality relationships—those with positional power have to include themselves. The question is not “How will you change?” but “*What are we each doing that is working and not working?*”

## Build development into day-to-day work.

At any moment, the odds are high we are under stress. At minimum, using these principles for learning and results diminishes the pull down the spiral into unproductive actions. But the promise is greater—true growth and exceptional results. Much self-direction is required to learn like this and that must be a focus of support and development for individuals and teams.

## Additional Resources.

- Obtain the **Resource Guide for *In-the-Moment Leadership Strategies*** available for subscribers only by clicking on [Subscribe](#) for free monthly resources.
- For selected references for this article, click on [References](#).

## About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. helps strengthen and enhance the impact of individual leaders, leadership teams, and consultants (e.g. quality consultants and improvement advisors) in the midst of work in order to create work environments which foster learning, motivation, well-being, and performance.

He is adept at assisting leaders in using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results. This approach can be applied to any current work but is especially effective in the midst of quality or innovation initiatives.

He has developed these approaches through more than 30 years as an organizational leader, speaker, consultant, and coach. His clients have included the Peterson Center on Healthcare, Health Quality Partners, and the Harvard Medical School Center for Primary Care. He has served as faculty and improvement advisor over 15 years for multiple initiatives for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in Boston, Massachusetts and was previously Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative (now part of the Kaiser system) in Seattle, Washington.

You can learn more and see client testimonials on his website at [neilbakerconsulting.com](http://neilbakerconsulting.com)