

# 10 BIG Development Goals for Leaders for 2012

By – Dan McCarthy

The end of the year is typically a time spent scrambling to do all the things you need to get done but still haven't finished. However, it's also a time to reflect on our accomplishments and think about what we want to achieve for the New Year. That includes individual development goals.

In a business context, individual development goals should be closely aligned with your short and long term job responsibilities. Each and every person's situation is different, so there is no one-size-fits-all development plan.

However, in the realm of leadership development, there are a handful of things a leader could do that have the potential to be truly \*transformational, life-altering, and help to create a whole new worldview.

I'm not talking about reading a book, taking a course, doing some networking, or fine-tuning some aspect of your current skillset.

No, these are the big, hairy, audacious, goals (BHAGs). The ones that are high risk, require a big investment of time, cause you to break out in a sweat, and have the potential to transform the way you lead.

No one should take on any more than 2-3 of these each year. In fact, you might only do one of each of these in a lifetime. So on one hand, don't take any of these lightly – they require a big commitment. On the other hand, maybe it's time to stop putting it off and take the leap?

Marshall Goldsmith says one of the biggest regrets old people have with their lives isn't their failures – it's that they didn't at least try to pursue their goals.

## **1. A complete career change.**

Career-wise, this is the granddaddy of development moves. We're not talking about just changing companies but doing the same thing – this is about leaving what you've comfortable with – and good at – for something brand new.

A lot of people do this out of necessity or perhaps out of dissatisfaction with what they're doing, and those are good reasons. In this case, it's about changing for the sake of learning something completely new and growing.

Sure, no one likes to start all over again at the bottom – but perhaps there's something out there that would allow you to use 40-60% of what you've already learned, and provide an opportunity to learn something new for the other 40-60%?

## **2. A job change.**

While not as high risk or high developmental impact as a career change, switching to a new company, or even division within a big company, offers the opportunity to apply what you know in an entirely new context. It could involve new people, markets, customers, products, tools, and processes, all of which are opportunities to learn and develop.

## **3. A geographic move.**

This one sometimes goes hand-in-hand with a job or career change. Learning to adapt in a strange new world can be scary, yet incredibly rewarding. I'm awestruck when I think of what it's like to be an immigrant.

If you're not ready for this, try a short-term expat assignment. Talk to others that have done it, you may find out it's not as bad as you think it could be.

And sorry, no, a vacation doesn't count. Although I can't tell you how many people I've met that have never traveled more than 100 miles from where they were born, like Jim Carrey's character in *The Truman Show*. In that case, it could be transformational.

## **4. Volunteer.**

Join a non-profit board, committee, organization, or just spend a day helping those less fortunate. You'll learn about courage, determination, inspiration, and hope, both from those you are helping and from the die-hard volunteers you'll work with.

**5. Take on a "[Greater than Yourself](#)" project.** I learned about this from Steve Farber, who authored a book by the same name. The idea is to pick someone – sort of a mentee – but instead of just offering a little mentoring advice to bring them along to your level – make a long-term commitment to help that person become even better than you. If every leader did this for just one person, we'd never have to worry about doing succession planning.

Less transformational, but still with the potential to be transformational:

## **6. Go back to school.**

If you never got that high school, Associate, Bachelor, Master, or PhD degree, and have regrets, then how about making 2012 the year to get started? For adults, going back to school can be a HUGE mountain to climb. However, it's often that first step that's the hardest. Nowadays, there are more ways than ever to get a degree. If you're interested, make an appointment with an admissions counselor, or attend an information session.

*Full disclosure: I work at a university, but I've always been a proponent of continuing education for adults.*

### **7. Find a mentor and/or hire a coach.**

Find a leader that you admire and ask if he/she will be a mentor for you. People often assume that highly successful people probably always have a lot of mentees, or they're too busy. That's usually not the case, in fact, I can't think of a single example of anyone who asked and was flat out told "no". If anything, the mentor is usually flattered, and all too willing to help. Go ahead - pick the person who you think is "the best" at what you want to get good at – and just ask. The worst that could happen is you'll prove me wrong – and you can then move on to your second choice. (-:

Hiring a professional coach is another alternative, or can complement a mentor. Yes, they can be expensive – but a good one can ask questions and challenge you in a way that unlocks insight and hidden potential. If you're lucky your company might pay for it, but I'm also beginning to see some more affordable coaching models being marketed to non-executives. Buyers beware – ask for references, check credentials, and interview a few.

### **8. Take on a strrrreetch project.**

Instead of a career or job change, identify a project where the stakes are high, has "home run" potential, it would be new to you, yet with a solid development plan and a lot of hard work, you can be successful. If you own a pizza shop, it could be adding a new menu of subs or opening a second shop. Think new products, new processes, new customers, fixing big problems, or taking on a long-standing relationship problems. No pain, no gain. Imagine what the line on your resume would read a year from now, then go make it happen.

### **9. Attend an intensive leadership development program.**

By "intensive", I mean a total immersion program. It should be at least 5 days, with at least one assessment, feedback (with at least one high quality assessment), coaching, an opportunity to apply what you've learned with a real-life, high risk, high reward project, and guided reflection (often called "Action Learning" programs). These programs, if well designed and run, can create a condensed, alternate reality, giving participants the chance to learn and take personal risks in a somewhat safe environment.

### **10. Get in shape.**

I saved the most controversial for last. What does getting in shape have to do with becoming a better leader, or more successful, or more productive, or even smarter? Well, as it turns out, the research is overwhelming and compelling – exercise will do all of the above, as well as all of the obvious health benefits. If you don't believe me, take a look at Harvard M.D. John Ratey's [website and book, Spark](#) (I saw him speak recently). Amazing stuff. - I guarantee you'll be motivated to finally drop that extra 10 pounds and start riding your bike to work.

How about you? What do you think of the list? What have been your most transformational leadership development experiences?