

BUILDING A PERSONAL GROWTH PLAN

EXTRACT: CHAPTER 50

MASTER EXPERT

HOW TO USE **EXPERTSHIP** TO
ACHIEVE PEAK PERFORMANCE,
SENIORITY AND INFLUENCE IN
A TECHNICAL ROLE

ALISTAIR GORDON & DOMINIC JOHNSON

DOWNLOAD MORE CHAPTERS AT [EXPERTSHIP.COM](https://www.expertship.com)

Building a Personal Growth Plan

How can we hold ourselves accountable for our own development? The answer is by building a Personal Growth Plan and *executing* it.

IN THIS CHAPTER, WE WILL EXPLORE:

- Why do we need to build a Personal Growth Plan?
- What makes a Personal Growth Plan meaningful and actionable?
- How do we motivate key stakeholders to help us successfully execute a Personal Growth Plan that will take us to the next level of Expertship?

EVEN THOUGH THIS CHAPTER is the last in the book, the authors hope it's a **new beginning** for most readers. This is where the real work begins. On ourselves. For ourselves. Because, as experts, we matter. Because we know we can make a *greater* difference.

Most experts we meet are so busy helping others and growing others that they forget to help themselves and grow themselves. They're so busy helping

their organization become more effective that they forget to spend time helping themselves become more effective. Just like those announcements on airplanes that tell you to fit your oxygen mask first and then help others, our message is to take the time to help yourself. If we really want to help our organizations succeed, delight more customers, and help the community sustainably prosper, we have to build our own capabilities. To make the biggest difference for others, we need to spend time on making ourselves the best experts we can be. This is the journey to Master Expert.

“If it doesn’t get measured, it doesn’t get done.”

The journey starts with us shaping a Personal Growth Plan. Here’s why. Here’s how.

In Search of Personal Growth

IN MOST ORGANIZATIONS, PERSONAL Growth Plans are called *development plans*. They’re promoted aggressively by enthusiastic HR teams as a template you must fill in. Their intention is to help us, but it somehow comes across as just another unnecessary administrative task that takes us away from the real expert work we need to get done. Well, that’s the easy excuse many of us have used for not completing our development plans. The truth is somewhat more complicated.

One of our key sponsors, Mark Smith, the CIO of Asia-Pacific at a significant global financial services firm, told us: “For years, I couldn’t get my senior technical specialists to complete a development plan. I’d get into trouble every year with HR because my team was the least compliant.”

Among the experts we’ve worked with, the excuses for not completing a development plan were as colorful as they were consistent. Technical experts didn’t see the need for development plans because, as far as they were concerned, they were already fully developed.

“What does a good growth opportunity look like?”

They were *experts*, after all. In addition, they were already undertaking technical courses to build their technical capability, which, of course, they chose because only they would know what courses they needed, and they didn’t need HR or anyone else to tell them how to do that.

What we now know, having worked with thousands of experts, and as this book articulates, is that technical experts need to *grow* their enterprise skills as well as their technical skills if they want to *grow* the impact and influence they crave. Growth is the theme here.

Hence, we encourage experts to shape and then execute a Personal Growth Plan, and this chapter is dedicated to showing readers how easy that is. Why have a plan? Because if it doesn't get measured, it doesn't get done. By documenting what skills, knowledge and experiences we're going to grow, how we intend to do so, and how we'll measure these achievements, we're creating a tool with which we (and others) can hold ourselves accountable.

CREATING AND ACTIONING

Your Personal Growth Plan (PGP)

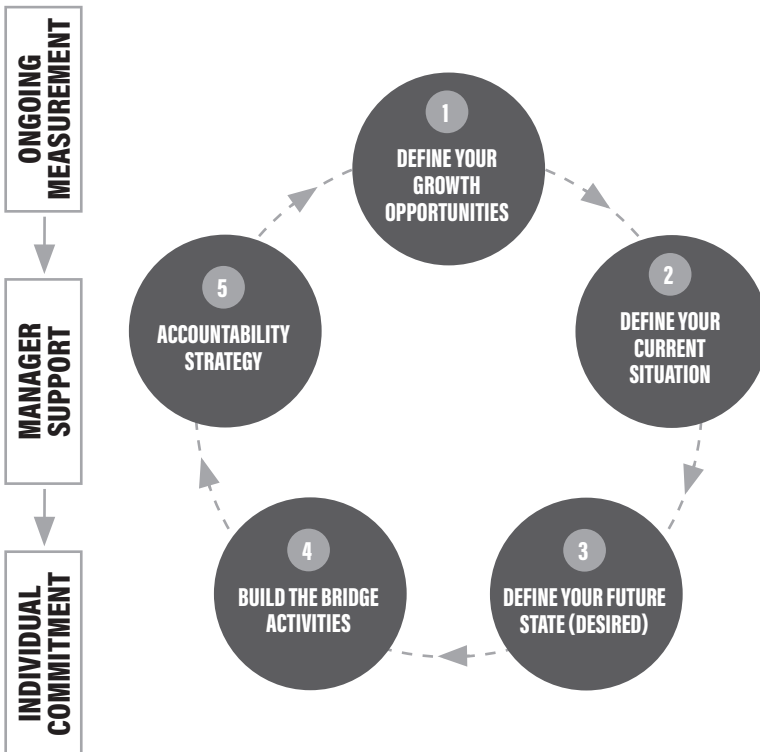


FIGURE 50.1: Creating and Actioning Your Personal Growth Plan

Steps to Creating a Personal Growth Plan

FIGURE 50.1 DESCRIBES THE five steps to creating a Personal Growth Plan, hereafter called a PGP.

STEP 1: DEFINE OUR GROWTH OPPORTUNITIES

Most of us have multiple areas in which we would like to grow our skills (new behaviors) and experiences. As readers have progressed through this book, many options for actions will have presented themselves. The key question is which actions and opportunities are we going to work on first, and why?

What does a good growth opportunity look like? It will typically have the following important attributes:

- **It will be doable:** that is, it isn't so ambitious that it's unlikely to be completed. If we choose a growth opportunity we think we can't successfully execute, we'll never follow through on it.
- **It can be completed in 6 to 12 months:** our preference is to plan for six months as it's a reasonably long period but the deadline is not too far away, which provides us with an impetus for action. If the opportunity that most appeals will take longer, we suggest breaking it up into smaller parts.
- **It will have a significant, sustained impact:** that is, the impact of achieving the goal far outweighs the effort expended to do so. The principle is one times effort for at least three times impact. The opportunity will help us increase the value we add as experts over and over again. This attribute is possibly the most important. We have to choose something that has a visible and long-lasting payoff. If we can't envisage a significant impact, we're unlikely to stay the course and complete the action.
- **It will be measurable:** we can construct a set of measures that indicate when we have achieved it. We need to be able to answer the question: "What does success look like?"

"Without knowing how good it will feel at the end, we'll never finish."

Not every opportunity will fulfill all of these criteria. A typical process we encourage is to make a list of all the opportunities we think are worthwhile and then choose the three that we believe will be the easiest to execute but provide the most worthwhile return. There may be, of course, an opportunity that requires very high effort and has a high degree of difficulty that we choose because the payoff is also very high. Importantly, we don't want

to over-extend ourselves by choosing opportunities that are too hard and require time we don't have, and then we fail to execute them.

At the end of most of this book's chapters, we suggest actions experts can take if they could benefit from building their skills in that area. These might be a good place to start.

To demonstrate how to shape a Personal Growth Plan, we've chosen an opportunity we believe fulfills the criteria above. The example we'll use is this: We've decided that we want to become a better listener. This sounds simple, but it isn't. It has an impact on many aspects of our work if we can achieve it. It feels like a small change with a very large impact.

STEP 2: DEFINE OUR CURRENT SITUATION

Figure 50.2 describes this process in more detail. We have to analyze the impact of our current behavior.

To use the example of listening, let's imagine we've realized that we actually don't listen well when interacting with stakeholders. We've explored the concepts in Chapter 20 (*The Power of Listening*), understood that we're guilty of selective listening and pretend listening (Figure 20.1) and want to progress to the high-level capability of empathetic listening (Figure 20.2).

In Box 1 of Figure 50.2, we own up to our current behaviors. In Box 2, we need to describe the impact of these current behaviors.

We urge readers to take the time to do this because a detailed examination of how this behavior is getting in the way of us being the best experts we can be helps drive our will to change. In this instance, we might conclude:

- Selective and pretend listening can lead to us missing important information, which leads to rework, personal brand damage, and occasionally poor outcomes for all parties.
- By not practicing empathetic listening, we're not really understanding what our stakeholders' motivations and underlying needs are. This gets in the way of us creating solutions that really delight the stakeholder.
- Current listening behaviors may give the stakeholder the sense that we're not really interested or invested in trying to help them.

With such analysis, we create a burning platform for change as the effort appears to be worth it.

STEP 3: DEFINE OUR DESIRED SITUATION

In Box 3, we state the behavior we desire to master and deploy. In this case, empathetic listening. And in Box 4, we describe the impact we expect these new behaviors to have. Again, this is an important step because without knowing how good it'll be at the end, we won't find the energy and determination to finish. In this instance, we might conclude that the impacts are:

- Much better relationships with stakeholders.
- Less rework.
- More opportunity to do outstanding work that delights our stakeholders.
- Ability to strengthen our personal brand.
- Taking time to save time.

Readers might notice that we haven't yet discussed what we might do to make this change. We've restrained ourselves from jumping to a solution—a theme throughout this book. Instead, we've focused on the outcomes. And the final stage of doing is to determine what measures we'll use to establish that the growth opportunity has delivered the positive impacts we planned (completing Box 5). This is possibly the part of personal growth planning experts struggle with most. Data-driven as we are, we tend to want to find a hard number that we can apply. With a growth opportunity, such as improving our listening, hard numbers are difficult to come by.

Analyzing the Impact of Behaviors



FIGURE 50.2: Analyzing the Impact of Behaviors

In this instance, we might consider a range of measures, some tangible and some intangible. Let's consider each of the positive impacts we've defined:

“What activities are we going to use to bridge the gap?”

- *Much better relationships with stakeholders.* We could use the Stakeholder Health Check audit (Figure 13.2) to assess whether, at the end of this plan, we're better able to answer the questions about our stakeholder than we are today. We could make a note today of how well we understand the stakeholder and their challenges and revisit the list in four months' time. These are meaningful measures, even if they remain subjective. We could ask the stakeholder in four months' time whether they think we listen more effectively to their needs, which is a courageous but powerful measure.
- *Less rework.* This would be a concrete measure. How much rework has been required in the last four months? Let's imagine it's six instances. What would we want to get that down to? Let's say two instances. That's a hard measure.
- *More opportunity to do outstanding work.* This might be a subjective measure from our own perspective, or it might be a structured, more objective measure if we're conducting proper post-implementation reviews with a broader stakeholder group (Figure 45.2).
- *Ability to strengthen our personal brand.* We would have to ask some colleagues to observe our behavior and provide us with feedback on whether they have noticed us listening more effectively. We'd probably want to engage people we trust, both to respect our confidentiality and to provide us with robust and honest feedback when we need it. Colleagues such as these are enormously valuable. If we're producing more outstanding work more regularly, we'll be in increasing demand, which is a sure signal that the organization has positively revised its view of the value we contribute.
- *Taking time to save time.* This ought to be a hard measure that is consistent with rework. How much time have we been wasting, and to what extent do we now have time to do higher value work? In Chapter 9, where we discuss the Expert Energy Engine, we suggest some processes to help experts measure what they actually spend their time on and consider what they would like to spend their time on.

Having completed Box 5, we're ready to move to stage four of shaping a Personal Growth Plan.

Building the Growth Bridge

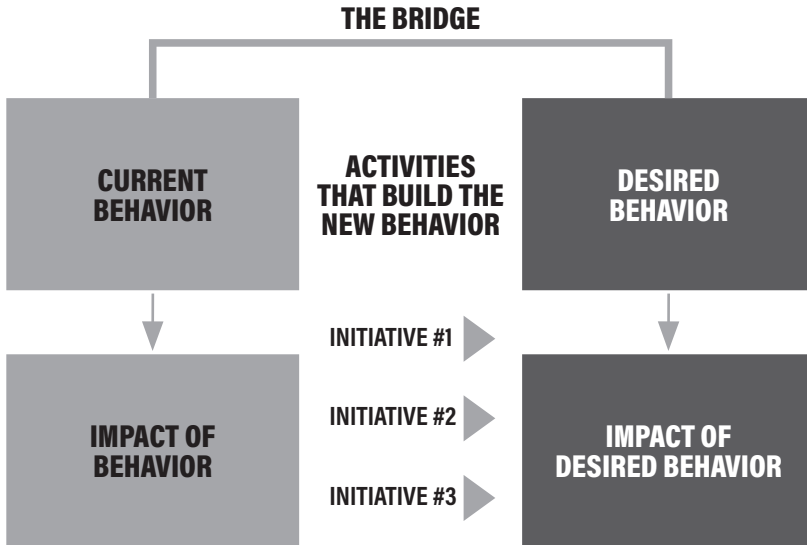


FIGURE 50.3: Building the Growth Bridge

STEP 4: BUILD THE BRIDGE—ACTIVITIES

Having defined our starting point, and also our finishing line and the positive impacts we hope our growth opportunity will realize, it's time to consider what activities we're going to undertake to achieve this growth. How do we bridge the gap between the two sets of behaviors (current and desired)? We have to build a *growth bridge* (see Figure 50.3).

We're looking for activities that help us master new behaviors. Typically, we choose two or three initiatives that we believe will help us achieve this objective.

“Finishing sentences for colleagues is disrespectful, stupid and arrogant all at once.”

In order to achieve our goal of mastering and consistently deploying empathetic listening, we might want to consider the following activities:

- **Ask more questions.** Throughout this book, we've emphasized the power of asking the right question at the right time in the

right way. Listening is all about gaining a deeper understanding of needs, opinions or proposals. In this instance, we might spend an hour considering what questions would enable us to get a deeper understanding of what our stakeholders are looking for. For example, when gathering the needs of a stakeholder, what set of questions can we prepare and then deploy? A further example: when a stakeholder proposes a solution to us, which additional questions can we ask to truly understand why they are proposing that particular approach?

- **Increase our listening intensity.** We'll try to be much more consistent about leaning in and really listening to what someone is saying. We'll hang on their every word. Wait until they've finished speaking. Pause even because they might voluntarily have more to say. Poor listeners tend to listen to the first half of the sentence and then complete it in their own mind, not actually listening to their colleague while doing so. Or worse, they regularly interrupt and finish colleague's sentences for them. This is possibly one of the most annoying traits a colleague can have—it's disrespectful, stupid and arrogant all at once. Letting a colleague finish and listening intently to what they are saying will significantly improve our precise understanding of what they're trying to communicate to us.
- **Listen to feelings as well as facts.** Focus on the emotional side of the conversation, as well as the verbal side. Try to accurately pick up on whether a stakeholder is frustrated, angry or sad. Each of these emotions means something different (and requires a slightly different response from us). Remember, we're trying to master *empathetic* listening.
- **Paraphrasing.** This is a technique all good listeners deploy to ensure they have understood a colleague correctly. We could decide to deploy it regularly in conversations. "So, what I heard you tell me was A, B and C. Is that right?" Our colleagues almost always want to embellish what we've paraphrased back to them, thereby deepening our understanding, which means we've listened more effectively.
- **Seek to understand why, not just what.** Colleagues tell us things, and as poor listeners, we just take those things at face value and move on. But what we're hearing is just that: the *what*. If we're truly to listen properly, we'll need to understand the *why* as well. More questions are required. "Can you help me understand..."

Phew—quite a lot there! But each initiative in its own right is doable, and in combination, they will transform our listening skills and our ability to understand, connect with and do great work for our stakeholders.

STEP 5: ACCOUNTABILITY STRATEGY

The final stage of shaping a PGP is to determine an accountability strategy. Who is going to hold us accountable for executing the plan, and how? The best way to do this is to engage key stakeholders in the process. Our managers may be an ideal contributor here if they regularly see us in action. Or perhaps colleagues who see us working with stakeholders every day.

The best PGPs are the ones that are alive, looked at regularly, checked weekly, discussed fortnightly, constantly revised and updated as items get ticked off, and have new opportunities added to them.

The most crucial element of any accountability strategy is our own individual commitment to executing the plan. This is why we emphasize that the payoff—the benefits and positive impacts that accrue from our effort—must be visible and worth fighting for.

Take our example of increasing the quality of our listening and consider what we're attempting to change: the habits of a lifetime. Yes, we discussed deploying techniques to make us a better listener, but in reality, this is a significant mindset change. On paper, the individual initiatives appear easy to execute. But in the day-to-day hurly-burly of our working environment, they're very hard to apply consistently. We'd better be committed.

Additional help

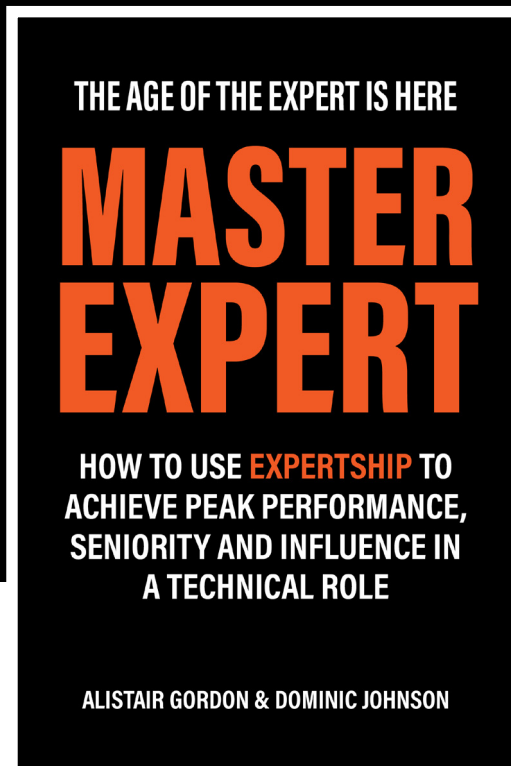
IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES, we've created a list of all of the Group Opportunity actions included in this book for your easy reference. We have an online *Expertship Growth Guide* at expertship.com which contains nearly 200 suggested growth opportunities for experts. We also have accredited Expertship coaches around the world who can help you shape a meaningful Personal Growth Plan, which is a small investment in your career that will be transformational. The coaching component of our programs is often the part participants tell us they valued the most.

A further level of commitment is to undertake an assessment of your current Expertship capabilities. A survey completed by stakeholders and colleagues called the *Expertship360* is available worldwide. You'll find details of your local supplier at our Expertship website above.

Not long ago, there were almost no resources available to experts to help them be the best experts they can possibly be. That's no longer the case. No more excuses. The world is out there, so let's go forth and change it for the better, as only experts can.

HOW TO BE A **MASTER EXPERT**

50 Chapters of techniques, ideas and skills to help technical specialists master relationships, business planning, risk and reward, CEOs and thought leadership.



ORDER THE BOOK AT

