Whether you’re a graduating student or climbing the corporate ladder, professional development planning will accelerate your career farther and faster than you may have thought possible.
Planning
A System for Success

A popular topic of conversation among many of my colleagues lately is that great American Saturday tradition: college football. Who’s in contention for the Heisman Trophy? Will my team become bowl-eligible and stay healthy? Does anyone think the Southeastern Conference won’t make it to another championship game? It is fun to watch talented student athletes give so much of themselves on and off the field for the love of a university, with only a hopeful handful even thinking about the NFL. For those elite few who aspire for a professional football career, coaches will tell them they must commit to the team and their training, set goals for themselves, and put together a plan that develops their position skills to such levels that win games and possibly a spot on a professional team. With no intentional planning, very few would do all things necessary that develop the skills and reach the level of performance of which a scout takes notice.

I believe outstanding performance requires a healthy combination of three things: motivation, self-awareness, and possessing the right competencies at the right time. Motivation is something each of us must discover daily on our own, and don’t underestimate its power over yourself and those on your team. Ask any coach about motivation and they’ll all agree. But this article isn’t about motivation, or football. I’d like to share a system that works on the other two concepts, and used throughout your career, whether you’re a graduating student or making waves in your field, it is one that will accelerate your professional development farther and faster than you may have thought possible.
Personal Development Planning

Personal development planning (PDP) is a continuous process meant to advance your ability to be effective in an organization (see Figure 1). Determined PDP is what will lay out the right actions you should take to become great at what you aspire to do. Don’t become complacent in past successes. What got you here, won’t necessarily take you there. So set goals for yourself for real growth. Grow into what is required to achieve your goals and to be successful in your chosen career path. The time to develop transferrable skills and competencies isn’t the day you decide to apply for a job; that time is today. This takes time, so don’t waste any. In a nutshell, PDP is a focused reflection of your current and future needs, and putting forth a plan that develops the necessary competencies for your success in achieving goals.

Many *EM* readers may recognize this process in the environmental management system (EMS) “Plan-Do-Check-Act” cycle of continual improvement, as defined in the ISO 14001 standard. In fact, the four stages presented here begin with “Act” and follow the EMS cycle, in principle, to the “Check” stage, similar to the last step of a PDP cycle. The continual improvement method has been proven a successful management system for facilities around the world; applied to you and your professional competencies, the method will lead you systematically toward meaningful growth.

**Self-Assessment**

The first step of PDP is conducting a 360° self-assessment (see Figure 2). You may not be as good as you think you are in a few areas. This could be tough on the ego, but a 360° perspective method has been proven very effective in achieving accurate and meaningful feedback to identify areas of needed self-development. Invite your boss, a mentor, peers, friends, clients, customers, and even people who report to you to participate in this assessment. Of course, take the time for an honest self-evaluation too.

If you conduct the assessments by personal interview, set up appointments after clearly stating the purpose and what you’re trying to accomplish. Ask for discretion but constructive candor. A more common approach is to conduct the assessment reviews through an online survey or feedback tool. Write questions that are designed to flush out the areas upon which you are weak—those competencies you don’t quite have to the level you need them yet, but those needed in the next chapter of your career. To get the best results, your trusted participants must feel they can provide honest feedback with no pushback or defensiveness from you.
In developing your assessment tool, have in mind the role to which you aspire and the types of things you’ll be doing. These can be both technical and nontechnical competencies. Competencies needed by a district manager may be different than those of an engineering project manager, for example. Christian Vanek of SurveyGizmo recommends the following feedback areas for a 360° event:

2. **Communication Skills** (Listening, Clarity, Speaking, Networking, Non-Verbal Behaviors, Openness, Negotiation, Energy, Giving Feedback, and Receiving Feedback)
3. **Team Skills** (Listening, Questioning, Helping, Participation, Peer Feedback, and Reliability)
4. **Organization Skills** (Project, Financial, Personal Time, Logistics, and Attention to Detail)
5. **Creativity Skills** (Problem-Solving, Problem Identification, Inventiveness, Brainstorming, and Making Connections)
6. **Interpersonal Skills** (Empathy, Confidence, Stress Management, Positivity, Negotiation, Group Work, Approachability, Enthusiasm, and Personal Appearance)
7. **Organizational Alignment** (Alignment and Understanding of: Community, Values, Mission, Vision, Strategic Plan, and Processes)

### Plan

Step three is to prepare a personal development plan you will follow. Think of a chart filled with plan elements. The rows of the plan are dedicated to each of the prioritized competencies you identified in step two, ranked in order of importance. The columns of the plan can take form a number of ways, but one example list, going left to right, is:

- Competency » Current Ability » Target Ability » Development Activity » Criteria of Achievement » Target Date

For activities, look for opportunities to practice the competencies you want to develop. Examples of development activities (opportunities) are joining professional organizations (in addition to and including A&WMA, of course), shadowing, apprenticeships, cross training, volunteering for special assignments, seeking webinars, reading books, and taking college classes. In choosing development activities, make sure they are realistic and achievable, but substantive and challenging. Once your plan is written, get started immediately and make it a part of your weekly schedule. Author Napoleon Hill writes, “Create a definite plan for carrying out your desire and begin at once, whether you ready or not, to put this plan into action.”

**Figure 2. 360° Assessment.**
I should note a multitude of development activities can be found within A&WMA. We have professional development courses both live and online. Accept a nomination for a leadership position as a Section or Chapter officer. Establish a mentor relationship with a member you know and respect. Contribute to your local unit newsletter, submit an abstract to the next annual conference, or join an event local host committee. These experiences are activities that will develop many of the skills Vanek suggests above. Don’t miss an opportunity to build competencies while enjoying your membership.

**Evaluate Progress**
Step four is periodically updating your plan and evaluating your progress. How far along are you in achieving the criteria you set for acquiring your target abilities? Is the target date realistic? Did you choose the best activities in the first place? About every three or four months, spend time overhauling the plan, as needed, based upon your progress and any changes to your environment or goals. As you achieve goals in the plan, set new ones that match your long-term vision of self-development.

And finally, remember this is an ongoing, continuous process. As you change jobs or get promotions, return to step one and re-assess your competencies, strengths, and weaknesses, then begin a new plan for your next chapter. Whether getting ready for a promotion or wanting to be more effective where you are, always strive to better yourself and get there with PDP.

The great Paul “Bear” Bryant was one of the most successful college football coaches of all time and led Alabama to six National Championships. He once said, “Have a plan for everything. A plan for practice, a plan for the game.” He and his coaches recognized that planning was key to winning. He also knew that you had to work hard to achieve greatness. In typical hardnosed fashion, The Bear said, “There’s a lot of blood, sweat, and guts between dreams and success.” Dream big, turn weakness into strength, work hard to succeed, but do it best with a game plan. em

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