



Column

Why we fail to grow

April 2012. I was a visiting professor at Tokyo University, and my dad had come to visit. During dinner one evening, I shared with him that I was feeling out of my depth at work, struggling at times, that maybe I wasn't good enough. He listened intently, as he always did, and said, "Manu, one's ambition should always exceed one's talent". He meant that what I was feeling was a good thing, as I was pushing myself to grow and learn. The wisdom of generations captured in an incisive quip.

A Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, embodied this wisdom in his theory of cognitive development. He called it the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). There are things we can accomplish on our own. For example, I can ride a bike without needing any help. There are other things, however, that we cannot do by ourselves. I cannot salsa. If I tried it, I would be uncomfortable, and make a fool of myself. But with the right help, perhaps I can learn it. Vygotsky's idea was that development and

growth happen in the second case, in the zone where you're trying to learn something that is beyond your current abilities. That is, by yourself alone, you will not be able to learn. But with the help of an expert you will be able to build on your abilities, grow, and learn. Over time, perhaps even I can salsa. In the wisdom of generations, what you want to learn – your ambition – must exceed your current abilities – your talent.

So how do we use Vygotsky's theory to design our own growth?

First, practise productive discontentment. Don't be contented with your current abilities. Get out of your comfort zone. Channel productive discontentment to seek and work on things that are beyond your current ability and skill set. You will struggle. You may fail. But you will also give yourself the opportunity to grow.

Second, embrace productive discomfort. It's not a nice feeling to struggle. Tell yourself it's okay to fail. It's okay to doubt. Your mindset matters. Tell yourself it's actually a good thing to be in this zone. Because in there you have an opportunity to grow and learn. The more you embrace it, the more you become comfortable with being uncomfortable, and the more you will grow.

Third, leverage productive failure. Struggle and failure alone do not guarantee learning. Even the healthiest of mindsets alone are not sufficient. To make the failure productive, we need to be resourceful, seek out the right kind of expert help, work with people, and plug into and build a support community around ourselves.

Of course, it sounds easier said than done. But my dad never said it was going to be easy. He just said it had to be done.



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