

THE INNER EDGE: RETHINKING LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Many of the most powerful leadership shifts don't come from learning something new, but from seeing the familiar in a new way, writes Neil McGregor.

When we think about leadership development, it's easy to default to formal qualifications, corporate training programmes, or the next must-read business book. These can be useful – but they often miss a deeper opportunity: the kind of growth that happens quietly, personally, and over time.

The truth is, many of the most powerful leadership shifts don't come from learning something new, but from seeing the familiar in a new way.

"Progress results from wise insights rather than grand designs."
– Jules Goddard

IT STARTS WITH AWARENESS

One of the most overlooked aspects of development is self-awareness. Not just knowing your strengths and weaknesses but understanding the thinking patterns that sit beneath your behaviour – especially in times of pressure or uncertainty.

Many leaders rise through the ranks on the strength of their competence or drive. But at some point, they hit a ceiling – not of capability, but of perspective. What got them here won't take them further. That's when development becomes less about skill acquisition and more about identity, mindset, and habits of mind.

This work often requires pausing long enough to reflect – not something modern leadership always makes easy. But the leaders who do, find that reflection isn't a luxury; it's essential. It becomes the grounding force that helps them respond rather than react, connect rather than control, and lead with intention rather than default.

PRACTICE, NOT PROGRAMME

There's a growing recognition that leadership isn't something you learn once and apply forever. It's more like a practice – something you work at over time, with conscious effort and feedback.

That might look like starting a reflective journal, creating space each week to step back from operational noise, or regularly asking trusted colleagues: 'What am I not seeing?'

Development also happens in the everyday – how we run meetings, make decisions, give feedback, and respond to setbacks. The best learning often doesn't come from stepping out of work, but from noticing what's happening in the work.

DEVELOPMENT IS SOCIAL

While personal insight is essential, it's not enough on its own.

Leadership is relational. How we show up affects others – and how others respond to us shapes our impact.

This is why development becomes even more powerful when explored with others. Whether it's in a peer learning group, team reflection sessions, or simply committing to more honest conversations, the shared aspect of development can surface blind spots, strengthen trust, and accelerate growth.

We all carry assumptions – about ourselves, others, and the way things should be. When we learn with others, we get a chance to test those assumptions, hear new perspectives, and expand our range.

WHAT COUNTS CAN'T ALWAYS BE COUNTED

Modern leadership often operates in a culture of metrics – KPIs, targets, dashboards. But some of the most important shifts in a leader's development aren't easy to measure. Things like emotional presence, humility, clarity of purpose, and the ability to create psychological safety.

These qualities don't show up in spreadsheets, but they're felt deeply in a team's energy, resilience, and performance. And they often come from personal work – quiet shifts in mindset and practice that ripple outward.

A QUIET INVITATION

In a world that moves fast, leadership development might feel like something to squeeze in "when things calm down". But it doesn't need to be big or loud to be meaningful.

Sometimes it's as simple as asking yourself: 'Who am I becoming?' And then listening carefully to the answer. ■



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As your trusted leadership and culture advisor, Human Synergetics offers solutions to help your business thrive. With extensive experience in creating sustainable individual, team, and organisational performance, contact Neil and the consulting team at neil@hsnz.co.nz to transform your culture and leadership. www.hsnz.co.nz