

Organization Practice

Intentional learning in practice: A 3x3x3 approach

Learning can be honed through practice. Here's an effective strategy to continually learn, grow, and achieve development goals.

by Lisa Christensen, Jake Gittleson, and Matthew Smith



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What drives most of us to learn something new is curiosity and a desire to keep growing. Turning that desire into new capabilities, though, requires a plan. As we have noted in our earlier research¹ about intentional learning, it's essential to cultivate both the right mindset and the right skills to keep learning throughout our personal and professional lives. Setting small, clear development goals is one of the five core practices of effective learners and serves as an anchor point for seeking out and benefitting from new learning opportunities.

Many people have asked us how to best put that advice into practice. Too often, the goals that are set become goals unmet. In our experience, the most effective strategy for achieving learning goals incorporates three key elements:

- ***A defined number of clear and immediate goals.***
It's fine to have a broad range of aspirations for continued growth. Most effective learners do. The best way to achieve them, though, is to focus on a few concrete goals at any one time.
- ***A defined period in which to meet those goals.***
Deadlines have a way of focusing the mind. While the cycle time for meeting a target depends on the nature of the goal itself, our research has found the optimal period should be long enough to establish new behavior and short enough to create a sense of urgency and momentum.
- ***A defined group of people who can support and monitor progress on goals.*** People are more likely to achieve goals when they enlist others who can help and hold them accountable.

This approach mirrors the natural arc for learning: identifying specific knowledge or a skill to learn, creating a process for how to learn it, and then engaging people and practices to help reinforce it, transforming knowledge into concrete capabilities.

To that end, we have designed a simple heuristic—"3x3x3"—as a memorable baseline method for designing professional-development goals in a way that aligns with the practices of effective learning.

In simple terms, 3x3x3 encourages you to define *three development goals*, over a *three-month period*, engaging *three other people* to support you in those goals and hold you accountable. It's a framework that we use in varying forms to help ourselves put intentional learning into practice. Here's how to think about each category.

Three goals

When it comes to setting development goals, we recommend focusing on no more than three at any given time. Anything more than that is likely to be counterproductive, forcing you to divide your focus, energy, and practice among too many pursuits. Building a new capability is hard and requires intentionality and focus. When people set too many goals, they often fail to make real progress on any one of them. In fact, they often find it hard to remember what they're trying to achieve. Having fewer concrete goals allows you to develop new habits and bring the right level of intentionality to improving your performance.

At the same time, there are also perils to setting too few goals. When people focus on achieving a single development goal in any given period, they may be missing opportunities to broaden their impact and boost their performance. Most of us have more than one domain in which we want—or need—to improve our performance. Given the pace at which skills and roles are evolving, it's unlikely that pursuing only one concrete goal is sufficient to meet the rising bar of expectations that many professionals need to meet to stay relevant.

Moreover, having a few development goals enables us to better leverage the full set of experiences we want to learn. A midcareer professional, for example, might want to work on being a better coach for her employees, *and* broaden her network of contacts in her industry, *and* improve her enterprise-wide focus in leadership meetings. Not only are her goals achievable when turned into a concrete action plan, they can also reinforce one another and encourage the executive to leverage day-to-day experiences in new ways.

¹ Lisa Christensen, Jake Gittleman, and Matthew Smith, "The most fundamental skill: Intentional learning and the career advantage," *McKinsey Quarterly*, August 7, 2020, McKinsey.com.

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As with most principles of development, we are looking for the “Goldilocks zone” here—not too many goals and not too few. Aiming for three goals will land you in the sweet spot.

Three months

Our second “3” refers to the length of time you should set to achieve development goals. Again, think of three months as a heuristic that underscores the importance of building a plan and process for achieving the goal you’ve set. The optimal duration of time may vary somewhat, depending on the nature of the goal. That said, there are several reasons why a three-month period is often effective for achieving development goals.

Three months provides enough “runway” to make tangible progress against a goal through cycles of practice, feedback, and (where needed) formal training. At the same time, a three-month period forces us to be concrete and specific in our goals, which decades of goal-setting research show is critical to goal attainment. It’s hard to fudge the specifics or procrastinate when the finish line is 12 weeks from the starting point of a process.

Second, a three-month period aligns with many of the natural rhythms of the organizational world, whether they be quarterly reporting, quarterly business reviews, or quarterly leadership updates. As with other natural cycles, there is a rhythm and feel to a three-month cycle that can be aligned with other rhythms in many organizations.

Setting a deadline of three months also forces us to break down longer-term goals into achievable chunks, allowing us to recalibrate or redirect our energies along the way. It creates a natural check-in point on the path to broader goals. Let’s take, for example, an HR generalist who is interested in pivoting to a people-analytics role. To do that, he may set a three-month goal to build a basic knowledge of core machine-learning methodologies and complete an introductory course through a massive open-source online-course platform. At the three-month point, he may discover that he hated every minute of the course and thus rethink whether the path is the right one for him. Or, he may love the course and then set a follow-up goal to learn how machine-learning techniques are specifically being applied in HR for the next three-month period. Either way, the three-month cycle provided an important checkpoint for him to ensure that his development goals remained aligned with his broader aspirations.

Three other people

The final “3” refers to the people who will help you work on your development goals. There is a natural instinct to keep our goals to ourselves. It protects us from embarrassment if we don’t achieve those goals and enables us to feel less vulnerable. It can feel uncomfortable to reach out for help. That said, involving others in our learning is one of the most powerful ways to improve goal attainment. It creates healthy social pressure. It allows others to know where their feedback or ideas would be most useful.

Socializing a goal also creates opportunities to celebrate and reinforce growth with others. That's why people often find it easier to lose weight or exercise more regularly when they're part of a support network as opposed to trying to change habits on their own. They share the challenge and the responsibility to stay on task. When teams make it the norm for each person to share individual development goals, the result is often a rich ecosystem for learning and growth where all members help one another.

Think of this as a suggestion to include *at least* three people. There is no real limit to how many people you can enlist in supporting you in your development goals; in fact, there may be many good reasons to go beyond only three people if you're in a bigger team. However, forcing yourself to talk to a minimum of three people creates a healthy discipline in understanding what kind of support you need. The key is to choose people who will have enough exposure to your work and progress in the specific domains in which you have set your development goals; these could include your teammates or other peers, direct reports, managers, or even your partner or children, depending on the nature of your goals.

A single external point of view or accountability buddy is better than none, but having multiple sources of support, insight, and feedback helps to multiply the potential for learning and growth.

Intentional learning is about getting more out of the moments of our day. Every project, every meeting, every conversation becomes an opportunity to learn and grow. While intentional learning can be spontaneous, it's also deliberate. The most effective learners know what they want to learn and why. They seek out opportunities to engage and have a bias for action. While they may be curious about a lot of things, they know how to focus their learning to get specific things done.

Learning can be honed through practice. The most important aspect of 3x3x3 is not the precise number of goals, months, or people, but the idea of having a simple, consistent process for setting and achieving goals that we can replicate throughout our career.

Using a 3x3x3 approach can take some of the guesswork out of setting development goals and provide a framework for continuous lifelong learning. We hope many readers will take the opportunity to build (and share!) their own 3x3x3 and make this a habit in service of their growth and professional development in the months and years to come.

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