



Crafting God's Ultimate Design: YOU

A Look At the Discipline of Self-Development

By Reggie McNeal

In his book, *Practicing Greatness*, Dr. Reggie McNeal looks at seven disciplines of extraordinary spiritual leaders. One of those disciplines is self-development. He challenges us to rethink how we approach it.

Mark Twain once said of an acquaintance that had passed away: "He died at thirty; they buried him at sixty." How do you keep from dying "in place?" I believe it's through self-development. The key is to keep learning. Focus on your strengths and grow through your failures.

Never Stop Learning

Seems easy enough, right? Yet, we're walking uphill on this issue, for a number of reasons. First, lifelong learning never ends. In our society, we go to school, we graduate, and we're done. But, *as a lifelong learner, we never graduate.* We have to have motivation and a strong internal guidance system to keep on the learning path.

The greatest challenge, however, to lifelong learning is *unlearning*. We frequently don't make room for new learning because we're chock full of other stuff. To combat that, we must practice what Peter F. Drucker called "*systematic abandonment.*" Stop practicing irrelevant lessons and move forward.

For instance, many Christian leaders are operating from the internal tape of the world they think exists, ver-

sus the world which really exists. Unlearning of the old world is a prerequisite to learning how to deal with the new one. The unlearning curve is as steep as, if not steeper than, the learning curve!

All leaders who engage in lifelong learning evidence two characteristics:

- *They're intentional about their learning.* Their learning is not haphazard. While they may not have a destination in mind (such as a terminal degree), they know what they want to explore and they have a strategy to get there.

- *Their journeys are designed to expose them to new ideas.* Lack of curiosity kills learning. Lifelong learners seek new vistas, new conversations, new learning opportunities, and new learning networks.

Focus on Your Strengths

From the very beginning, many of us have had our noses rubbed in places where we don't perform well. Our natural default position is trying to shore up talents or improve skills so we become well-rounded and good at many things.

Newsflash: people are *not* balanced! God didn't design us to be balanced. Our talents, our passions, our personalities make us "out of round"—not normal or average. And this is a good thing. Stop spending so much time on your weaknesses. Courageously hone your strengths. When you focus on your skills and what you're good at, you're also saying, "This is what I'm *not* good at." That takes guts.

In the Christian world, there seems to be a strong perfectionist bias. We have to do everything well. It just seems un-cool to admit there are some things we don't do well. Unfortunately, this way of thinking imposes and perpetuates mediocrity.

Grow Through Your Failures

Don't get me wrong. I'm not recommending you get really good at failing. But you *will* need to face the inevitable. When failure comes, it's up to you whether you shrink or grow, whether you learn or derail. Great leaders accept failure, but they don't stop there, letting it be "the book" on them. Instead, they adopt some very important practices and approaches to their failures by:

- Admitting the mistake
- Accepting responsibility
- Making restitution

7 Disciplines to Practice

In addition to **Self-Development**, Reggie McNeal addresses six other disciplines to practice greatness.

- The Discipline of **Self-Awareness**
- The Discipline of **Self-Management**
- The Discipline of **Mission**
- The Discipline of **Decision Making**
- The Discipline of **Belonging**
- The Discipline of **Aloneness**

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- Reassessing life vision and values
- Mourning the loss
- Moving to closure
- Accepting direction
- Establishing new behaviors and accountabilities

You can use this checklist to make sure you grow through your failures and become even more useful to God and well developed in your leadership role in the kingdom.

A Word to Managers... About You

I've been asked: "What's the top lesson Christian leaders need to unlearn?" Certainly, there are always personal habits we often need to unlearn. But in a church context, I would say a critical need is unlearning a church-based model and then learning an apostolic model.

A church-based model starts with programs, budget, real estate issues, etc. Apostolic leadership, on the other hand, starts with a look at what's going on in the world. Apostolic leaders ask, "How can we actually become partners with what God is already doing in the world?" Church-based leaders think God is most at work in the church; apostolic leaders understand that God is most at work in the world.

We've learned that you cannot separate leaders from the organizational culture from which they operate. You can't treat one without dealing with the other. So if you're a Christian leader who suddenly gets the apostolic principle, but you're in a church culture that tends to be inward focused, you've set up crosscurrents. I'd still encourage you to abandon some old lessons and embrace new ones. Be aware, however, that you'll need resiliency and an ability to handle conflict.

A Word to Managers... About Others

You can create a culture within your ministry that encourages self-development. First of all, help people discover what their talents are, because a lot of people are somewhat or even severely naïve about what they bring to the table. Often, it's because they've been affirmed for things they've done along the way, but they don't know why they're good at them. Instead, get people to think about what their true talents really are.

Second, help those on your team redesign their own scorecard, which is built around their strengths. When you have a handle on the strengths and weaknesses within your team, you can manage those weaknesses through outsourcing, partnering or recruiting. Obviously, you want to make sure those bases are covered.

Third, create a venue for people to practice their talents so they can get better at them. Let the punters punt. They don't have to spend extra time with block and tackle exercises.

Managers must help others focus on their talents to build a truly winning team.

Dr. Reggie McNeal is the director of the leadership development office at the South Carolina Baptist Convention, Columbia, SC. His books include *Revolution in Leadership*; *A Work of Heart: Understanding How God Shapes Spiritual Leaders*; *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*; and *Practicing Greatness*. You may contact him at reggiemcneal@scbaptist.org.



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