Continuous personal development is fundamental to career growth, professional satisfaction, and having a broader impact in the world. And while the self-help industry and leadership professions have made a fortune on our obsession with getting better, failure rates remain alarmingly high.

In one survey, of more than 1,000 people who'd set goals for personal development, more than 96% of them failed. Another source suggests that 80% of New Year’s resolutions are abandoned by February. Why so much failure? It may be due to a lack of commitment or to choosing development areas that are overly corrective (such being more punctual or learning to control your temper) rather than focusing on strengths (such as running a faster mile or finding new ways to apply your keen analytical skill).

You and Your Team Series

Improving Yourself

A dangerously flawed assumption undergirds these explanations. They infer that an individual’s development happens...individually. Nothing could be further from the truth. Despite our common cultural notion of “self” improvement, the most successful efforts to self-improve have other people at their core.

The research of Stanford professors Geoffrey Cohen and David Sherman explains why this is so. They suggest, in their self-affirmation theory, that our need to maintain positive self-perceptions leads to us minimizing the impact of our shortcomings. That’s because when attempting to learn new things our egos become naturally self-protective. We reflexively hide, setting the stage for self-improvement efforts to fail. In other words, human beings are infamously bad observers of our own reality. Our ability to calibrate where we are effective, or not, and which talents are worthy of investment, or not, requires the eyes and insights of those best positioned to help decide — those on
the receiving end of our behavior. Further, it’s much easier to sustain commitment to hard personal change with the active participation of others.

Here are five ways to build a “self-improvement team” and ensure that your personal change efforts will stick.

- **Do an informal, monthly 360-degree review.** A company’s annual or semiannual data collection efforts to provide 360-degree feedback to leaders on how they are doing is all well and good. But waiting a year or two for feedback can be dangerous. In my work with executives trying to stretch into new areas of leadership, I have them gather a team of five to seven people made up of colleagues, friends, and even family. The people are told about specific areas the leader is working to develop and asked to watch for progress and setbacks. Each month the leader checks in to ask “How am I doing?” Each person shares three to four observations they’ve had during the month and, for setbacks, offers suggestions for improvement. This not only accelerates the ability to adopt new behavior but also ensures that their intentions and actions are congruent. It also builds others’ commitment to the leader’s success and prompts them to reflect on their own impact.

- **Create accountability for change.** To muster the grit needed to persevere through change, people must believe there will be a consequence for not changing. Even when people can articulate genuine desire for improving and the benefits they will gain, they often lack the drive to see personal development efforts through. But if they know they will have to answer for progress, it’s game changing. As an example, during company-wide leadership development efforts with our clients, we establish peer-coaching relationships between leaders from across the organization. These provide a safe place to discuss setbacks on development efforts, celebrate progress, get advice on new approaches, and challenge each other when commitment wanes. Knowing that someone is going to ask you about commitments you’ve made creates a level of accountability that raises the ante on following through. Discouragement can set in for those who naturally fixate on failures of past efforts to change, capitulating to the “See, you knew you couldn’t do it” voices in their head. But being able to express feelings of discouragement or self-doubt to a peer confidant curbs our natural instincts to isolate and sabotage. Having a trusted colleague to help correct faulty self-beliefs and, yes, provide a bit of scolding for self-pity or backsliding can make all the difference.

- **Join others on similar journeys.** Mutual reinforcement from others working to improve similar areas can be a powerful source of motivation. Look for a peer, or even a group of peers, with whom you can meet regularly. Online learning communities, discussion groups, or courses can provide a shared learning platform. The exchange of empathy, success stories, and “watch out for...” insights can build confidence and commitment to press through setbacks, and can accelerate the adoption of new behavior. When I work with executives in organizations, I create cohorts of four to six leaders that travel together on common learning pathways. There are ground rules about psychological safety and confidentiality that make being vulnerable nonthreatening. They are able to push each other out of ruts. Most powerful, having a sense of deep ownership for one another’s success creates a momentum for change that the rest of the organization benefits from.

- **Create a laboratory to practice in.** Improving any aspect of our lives — building new skills, changing bad habits, adopting new approaches, or shoring up weaknesses — is an ongoing, arduous process. It requires making mistakes and learning from them. Just as an aspiring virtuoso pianist must practice scales, there must be a place to hone whatever new behavior is being adopted. Without practical application, change becomes a cognitive exercise that imagines what change might be like but never attempts to actually change. One introverted executive I worked with struggled to speak in front of groups of any size, but his role demanded that he do it well. We used local community groups and internal departmental meetings as safe, low-risk places for him to practice simple presentations and Q&A sessions. Another client needed to be more consistent giving one-on-one feedback, but her conflict aversion made it difficult for her to deliver tough messages. We created scenarios of varying types of difficult conversations, and she used professional acquaintances outside of her organization to practice two to three times per week. Whatever improvement a leader is attempting to make, it will require ongoing experimentation and rehearsal before change becomes the new normal.
If you hire a coach, make sure it's the right one. While it's surely not a requirement for self-improvement, hiring a coach can be a very effective approach to development for some people. There are an abundance of leadership, life, career, and performance coaches available. But finding the right coach is harder than most think. In one global study of coaching, 65% of failed coaching efforts were due to a mismatch between the coach and the client, and 53% were due to the questionable expertise of the coach. To select the coach that's right for your self-improvement, there are two factors to consider. The first is chemistry. Does the coach make you feel at ease? Do you feel you could be vulnerable with them? Does conversation about important issues feel natural? Chemistry can be easily confused with comfort, and it's important to distinguish between the two. This isn't someone you will socialize with or take a ski trip with. This is someone to whom you will entrust deeply personal thoughts and aspirations. More important, it's someone who will challenge you and give you hard feedback. The second factor is relevant capability. Do they have expertise that specifically matches the area you want to grow in? Have they successfully helped others on similar developmental paths? This factor is often confused with having credentials. The fact that someone has been an effective trusted advisor to others and has letters after their name doesn't mean they will be effective for you.

If you've ever failed at a personal improvement effort, examine whether there was sufficient involvement from others. As one critical study discovered, personal transformation cannot happen apart from social transformation. Including others who have a vested interest in your personal change means you increase the odds of your success and, in turn, help them increase the odds of theirs.