

LIVE 2>> LEAD

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10 Characteristics of a Growth-Focused Environment

When I was much younger, I found myself in a job situation where the environment wasn't conducive to growth. This frustrated and discouraged me. I had always been focused on growth and improvement. From basketball as a kid to speaking professionally, I was always looking for ways to get better at what I was doing. I might not have always had an official plan for growth, but I was continually pursuing growth. Now I found myself in a place where growth was not just ignored; the environment discouraged it.

Maybe you've found yourself in a similar situation. Back then, I could see clearly all around me what a growth environment *didn't* look like. But one day, I realized that I had never really thought about what a growth environment *did* look like. What were the characteristics of that environment? I was eager to figure it out, so I could go in search of one. So I created a list of characteristics to look for in any environment, so that I could be sure it was a place where I could grow. This is what I wrote:

In a growth environment,

1. Others are ahead of you.

Is it possible to grow in isolation? Sure, but not as fast as you can grow with others. And growth happens even more when at least some of the people are ahead of you on the journey. In a growth environment, the accomplishments of those ahead of you encourage and challenge you to do more than you thought you could.

2. You are continually challenged.

It's one thing to be challenged by the growth of others. That will certainly help you grow. But it's even better when the job or task itself is challenging. When's the last time a boring job made you want to grow?

3. Your focus is forward.

"Yesterday ended last night." This is what leaders of growth environments believe. They're more interested in conquering the next challenge than worrying about the past.

4. The atmosphere is affirming.

My parents used to say, “You catch more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.” In other words, in a growth environment, the leader understands that being positive yields better results than negativity. Being affirmed feels good, and it gives you the courage to stretch and grow more.

5. You are often out of your comfort zone.

I’ve often said that you should stay in your strength zone, but get out of your comfort zone. The skills that you focus on growing should be areas where you have some natural ability, as opposed to trying to shore up weaknesses. But that doesn’t mean you should be comfortable. Getting out of your comfort zone happens when you’ve taken on a challenge that’s bigger than you. And that bigger challenge yields bigger rewards.

6. You wake up excited.

No, not every day. Everyone has a bad day sometimes. But overall, in a growth environment, you feel so positively challenged and affirmed that you are eager to get up every day because you expect to keep growing and learning.

7. Failure is not your enemy.

By focusing on solutions rather than blame, a growth environment gives you permission to make mistakes, admit them, and learn from them. Failure is such a big part of growth, that people don’t fear it.

8. Others are growing.

In addition to those who are ahead of you, are the people around you growing? Moving together toward a common goal can be exhilarating, like being on a winning team. In a growth environment, people almost can’t help growing because it’s emphasized and affirmed.

9. People desire change.

Growth equals change. If the people around you don’t desire it, or worse, if they resist it, then your environment is not one of growth. In a growth environment, change is encouraged and celebrated.

10. Growth is modeled and expected.

In a growth environment, the willingness to grow is demonstrated at all levels. Leaders expect it of themselves as well as their people. They hold themselves and others accountable when it's not occurring. And they celebrate growth when it happens.

Writing my list had a great effect on me. It gave me clarity on my then-current situation, as I became more aware of how it was slowing down my personal growth. It also showed me what kind of situation I needed to look for in the future. Soon afterward, I made a difficult change, getting out of my comfort zone and stepping into a new environment where I could thrive and grow again. What kind of environment are you in? Is it help you grow or holding you back?

Are you a leader? If so, you can make your organization into a growth environment. Use this list to check your progress.

Are you a team member? If so, you may not have much input into your environment. Use this list to see what kind of environment you might want to be in. If you're in a bad environment, it may be time to move. If you are not able to move as easily as I did, here's some good news: you can grow in a non-growth environment. It's just harder.

Are you a parent? It wasn't until after I wrote my list that I realized that I had basically described my home environment growing up. My parents did a phenomenal job of nurturing and encouraging our personal growth and learning. Use this list to create a growth environment in your home. You'll give your children a gift that they'll use the rest of their lives, as I have.

Personal growth is challenging. It involves mistakes and failure. A good environment certainly makes it easier to grow. But whether you're in a good environment or not, you can learn and improve where you are. Even the most challenging situation can lead to incredible growth. Continue to keep your eyes on that prize.