

Leadership and the Enemies of Learning

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One of the more interesting things about the current difficult economic environment has been watching how different business leaders have reacted to it. Those who have done the best to secure their companies' interests, protect their market positions, and retain their best people, have in my experience been those who immediately went into learning mode. Whether they look at the changes as an opportunity to learn new strategies for success, or simply to learn how to survive in the new environment, they have opened themselves and their organizations to learning. In doing so, they have discovered new possibilities for themselves and their companies.

That brings up the question, what sets a learner apart from those who are successful in one environment but cannot seem to find new actions that work in a different one? To answer that question it is important first to differentiate learning from simply amassing data. Learning creates a change in behavior, or at least the possibility for new behavior. It generates the potential to take new or different actions in the world.

Learning to ride a bicycle, for example, means being able to get on one and ride it when you want to. Before you couldn't, after you can. The same is true for learning new or different behaviors and actions in any other domain of life, including business leadership, family, artistic expression, and community service. Learning opens us to new possibilities for action that may be more useful or appropriate for the context we find ourselves in. This is especially important when we suddenly find ourselves in a different context, such as a recession.

So, what makes it possible to learn new behaviors and actions quickly, or even to learn them at all? To put it simply, learners have eliminated almost all of their personal enemies of learning, those attitudes, emotions and behavior patterns that dull or even kill our ability to learn.

Here are a few key enemies of learning, as described by Julio Olalla, the noted coach, writer and teacher:

- **Our inability to admit that we don't know.** We have learned the value of knowing and we devalue not knowing. But in order to learn we have to allow ourselves to be confused to be able to say, "I don't know" *without judging ourselves or others*. "I don't know" is the place where new learning begins. When we say "I already know that" we are with only the assumptions we already have. Being able to say "I don't know" without judgment is one of the great advantages children have which make them such fast learners. Olalla notes that "to be a child is to live in awe of the discovery of domains of action whose existence we were not capable of even anticipating."

Another powerful variation on this theme is the fear of admitting that we don't know. When knowing is so highly valued and not knowing devalued, I may assess that admitting I don't know something would cause others to devalue me. This can also prevent me from beginning the learning process.

- **The desire for clarity all of the time.** A prevailing attitude of many in our culture is wanting to be clear about everything all of the time. Like the inability to admit that we don't know, this deprives us of the process of inquiry.
- **Lack of priority for learning – “I don't have time.”** One of the things we tell ourselves far too often in our super-fast-paced environment is, “The world is moving too fast and I don't have time to learn.” We fail to consider that this is a problem of assigning priorities—if we did we'd have to acknowledge our own responsibility. Learning must be a priority or it won't happen. The irony of a life that is so packed with doing that there is no time for learning is that little of value may ever actually get done. When what we are doing isn't working, simply doing the same things faster won't get us what we need and want. It is time to take time to learn new actions.
- **Inability to unlearn.** We assume that if it worked well before it should work well again. This is rarely so. For example, I used a DOS-based computer where I worked for some years. When I took a job at a new company where they used Macintosh computers I found that I had to *unlearn* what worked on a DOS computer in order to learn to use the Mac. Once I did so I became much more productive. But I couldn't have benefited from using the Mac unless I was willing to unlearn the DOS system. Imagine if I had continued to try typing “DIR” on my Mac screen every time I wanted to see my files! Yet many times we confront new situations by simply repeating old actions over and over again, frustrated that they don't work.
- **Ignoring the emotional dimension of learning.** Learning requires creation of the appropriate emotional field or context—one of respect and caring. Learning requires an opening to the new and a disposition to question what we already know. It also requires courage and trust. These form an emotional predisposition to learning without which it will not take place.
- **Ignoring the body as a dimension of learning.** We need to have a body that can house a new interpretation or perform a new action. New learning changes the body's physiology. Depending on what we learn, it may create changes in the neural structure of the brain, the electrochemistry of our nervous systems, even the shape of the body. Whatever we do we do it with the body. The ability to learn requires the ability to open our bodies to change.
- **Confusing learning with acquiring information.** Far too often today we confound having lots of data with learning—if we “know” some new bit of information we consider that we have learned something. Yet simply possessing information doesn't give us a clue as to how to use it effectively. If we only have one or two possible interpretations for the data, neither of which seem to get us where we want to go, we will have to learn a new interpretation. Learning has to do with effective action.
- **Not giving permission to others to teach us.** When we declare someone to be our teacher we invest them with trust and authority. We recognize that they are more effective in a particular domain of action than we are and we declare that we want to be more effective in that domain than we currently are. When we do not give a teacher permission to teach us, we

rob ourselves of the opportunity to learn. There are many ways in which we deny this permission. We may fear admitting to a potential teacher that we don't know. Conversely, we may believe that we know as much as—or more than—he or she does. We may believe we can—or should—learn whatever it is by ourselves. We may believe we are incapable of being taught. All of these attitudes and assessments deny us the opportunity to learn from others.

- **Lack of trust.** To learn is to introduce oneself to the unknown, into an action domain which in we accept not knowing. The only way we can get to our destination is to trust our teachers and allow them to guide us. Distrust derails the process. Yet blindly trusting someone to teach us can be folly. What is required is trust with prudence. We reserve the option to withdraw our trust at any point during the process. We continually offer the teacher the opportunity to demonstrate that he or she worthy of our trust.

As a leader, no matter what level you are leading at, from project team leader to CEO, or what domain you are leading in—business, family, community—the ability to learn quickly is critical to effective action in a changing environment. One constant in our world is change: technology itself is evolving at breakneck speed and it is changing how we live our lives almost as quickly; economic conditions are in flux; the political and economic relationships between peoples and countries are shifting continuously. Those who are best able to expand their possibilities for effective action through learning will be the successful leaders of our businesses, our communities, and our governments.

Given that, what gets in the way of your learning as you confront new situations that demand new actions? Do you find it difficult admitting to yourself or others that you don't know something? Do you fail to prioritize for learning and give it enough time in your busy schedule? Do you rigidly hold on to actions that have worked in the past, even though they clearly aren't working now? Do you refuse others permission to teach you? As a leader in your business, your community, in your family, in your personal life, what are your enemies of learning? How can you evade or defeat them in your life?