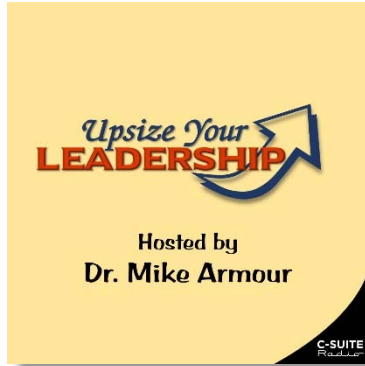


Make Self-Development a Daily Routine

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

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A few months ago, I devoted an episode of this podcast to basic guidelines for the practice of lifelong learning as a leader. I drew examples from the lives of several prominent CEOs whom I've coached or worked alongside, people who headed huge American corporations. To a person, their lives epitomize what it means to be a lifelong learner and to have a daily routine of self-development.

A few weeks after that program aired, I came across an intriguing set of statistics about various giants in the field of global business leadership and how much time they each devote to their personal self-development. I want to share some of these striking statistics with you today.

And while I'm at it, I want to revisit the theme of lifelong learning and add some principles which time constraints forced me to omit in my earlier podcast. If you're serious about personal and professional self-development – and every serious leader should be – the next 20 minutes are well worth your time as we highlight proven ways to Upsize Your Leadership.

When we talked about lifelong learning a few weeks ago, I touched on four qualities which are essential if a person is truly serious about being a lifelong learner. The four were 1) an insatiable desire to improve; 2) a willingness to protect set blocs of time for self-improvement; 3) a genuine sense of humility; and 4) and fourth, an avid curiosity.

In this episode I touch on three more guidelines for being an effective lifelong learner. And I begin by going back to one of those four qualities which I just listed. The third item on that list is a willingness to protect set blocs of time for self-improvement. Today, let's go a step further. Let's expand on protecting blocs of time by adding a corollary which assures that we make the best use of that time.

To be specific, if you are to pursue lifelong learning on a structured, daily schedule, you need to know the best way – and the best time of the day – for you to learn.

We've all heard about differences in learning styles. Some people learn best by reading. Others by listening. And still others by being part of an interactive group. As leaders, our busy schedules give us precious little time for learning activities. We therefore need to make the very best use of the time at our disposal. This means structuring our learning experience around the way that we learn best.

When I began my own commitment to lifelong learning, my choice of learning channels was quite restricted, to say the least. Basically, it boiled down to reading. Cassette tapes had begun to appear. But titles on leadership were limited in number and cassette players were bulky and expensive. CDs were still on the distant horizon. Videos were available to consumers only in a 16-millimeter format. And the rudiments of the internet were still twenty years away.

Not only that, workshops or seminars on leadership were few and far between. That's hard to believe today when leadership programs abound. In the 1970s, however, I had to search long and hard – without the benefit of Google – to find leadership workshops to attend.

So, books were my only viable choice for lifelong learning. Fortunately for me, reading is my best way to learn. It was not the preferred learning style for many of my friends, who struggled to finish two or three books a year. By contrast, I was consuming two or three a week. And by the time I was in my late thirties, my personal library had over two thousand volumes.

It turns out that I was in pretty amazing company, without being aware of it. Did you know that Bill Gates reads 50 books per year? That his partner in philanthropy, Warren Buffet reads five to six hours per day, including five newspapers?

And then there's Arthur Blank, co-founder of Home Depot, who reads two hours per day. So, too, does Dan Gilbert, owner of the Cleveland Cavaliers, only to be one-upped by his fellow-owner in the NBA, Mark Cuban, who reads three hours each day. Another billionaire, David Rubenstein goes through six books a week. And even Mark Zuckerberg, with the universe of digital media at his beck and call, reads at least one book every two weeks.

If we explored their childhood, we would probably learn that many of these people made reading a daily habit early in life. We do know that Elon Musk, creator of the Tesla automobile and a pioneer in privately-financed space exploration, routinely read two books a week while growing up.

Notice that each of these men presides over a massive business empire. Imagine the myriad of pressing issues which clamor for their attention every day. Yet lifelong learning is so important to them that they carve out hours of time daily simply for on-going self-development. Their example puts to rest the excuse that I have too many things on my plate to spend time each day in self-development.

As for me, when I embarked on serious lifelong learning, I was blessed to have a preferred learning style – reading – which aligned with the only technology available at the time for the on-going pursuit of learning. Books. I had a range of choices. I could read paperback books. Or I could read hard-bound books. If I wanted to learn daily, I had no other choice.

Today, the choice of technologies for learning is no longer held to choosing between hardback or softback editions of a book. Leaders can tap into whatever information they seek by turning to audible books, ebooks, podcasts, online videos, interactive webinars, and an endless proliferation of in-person workshops, conferences, and seminars. From the standpoint of learning styles, no one has an excuse for ignoring lifelong learning.

While it's important to determine your best way to learn, of similar importance is knowing what time of the day is best for you to learn, for you to explore new concepts and ideas. For me, it's early in the morning or just shortly before bedtime.

Most of the more successful leaders whom I've coached carve out early morning time for their personal enrichment. That allows them undistracted focus on what they are reading, hearing, or watching before the day assaults them with countless distractions. It also allows them, over the course of the day, to reflect on what they have learned and apply it to situations which happen to arise. It always amazes me how often something comes up during a day's activities which gives me an opportunity to apply a concept which I read about earlier that morning.

Early mornings are not available to everyone, especially parents with small children who must be made ready for school or daycare. These adults may need to structure their "learning time" as a midday recreational break from the demands of their work. I have clients who build this time for reading, listening, or watching into lunch hours or coffee breaks. Of course, millions of people are listening to books and podcasts as part of their daily commute. That may not be their ideal learning environment, but it is far better than ignoring learning opportunities altogether.

The second point I would leave with you today is that lifelong learning is most fruitful when we pursue learning opportunities which cross-fertilize with our primary interests. One of my graduate professors drilled into his students the principle, "Read widely, wisely, and well." He began with "widely" because he knew that intellectual creativity is often the product of marrying something in our specialty with ideas drawn from an entirely different field.

Let me share a personal example. As a young naval intelligence officer, I thought that I might one day like to be a naval attaché in some foreign embassy. I was still years away from having enough rank to qualify for such posts. But I decided to begin laying some groundwork which would serve me well should an attaché opportunity ever present itself. I therefore undertook a master's degree in American diplomatic history at a local university.

Later, my intelligence career took me in an entirely different direction. But that master's degree turned out to be one of the most helpful studies I ever undertook. You see, years later in civilian life I found myself working in conflict resolution. I even wrote my first leadership book on conflict management in faith-based institutions. To my surprise, some of the most useful insights for my work in conflict resolution came from that extended research in diplomatic history. Where better than the study of diplomacy to learn the language and techniques used to defuse serious conflict?

Even today, I try to devote a third of my reading time to topics which are outside my primary realm of daily activity. And it's intriguing how often that pays off. In the midst of a coaching session or a training program, an enlightening illustration will pop to mind from a totally unrelated field. And the same thing happens when I write books or blogs or deliver keynotes. My professor was right. When we broaden our learning to diverse fields, the cross-fertilization pays rich dividends.

My third take-away today is that for lifelong learning to yield its most beneficial results, you must have the courage to stretch your comfort zone. We don't tend to learn in the heart of our comfort zone. There's no need to. Our most profound learning occurs in those settings which stretch our comfort to its limits. Lifelong learners should therefore have a goal of systematically stretching their comfort zone.

For leaders, this may mean accepting responsibilities which are well beyond their proven abilities. For me, such a moment came at 37 when I took the presidency of a small liberal arts college teetering on the brink of bankruptcy. Almost everything I did in that job stretched me beyond my previous levels of experience.

For others the stretch is to take on their fears and conquer them. It may be a fear of public speaking. A fear of cold-calling. Or a fear of being disliked. Whatever the fear, it will never be overcome while we are nestled deep in our comfort zone.

Some self-development gurus encourage people to get completely outside of their comfort zone. I hesitate to use that phrase. I'm more for people seriously stretching their comfort zone rather than getting outside of it completely. From my experience, people do not perform well, nor do they learn well, if they are entirely outside of their comfort zone. They are so focused on merely coping or surviving that anxiety overpowers their learning potential.

The wiser choice is to take on challenges at the fringes of your comfort zone and incrementally spread your comfort zone wider and wider. I once had a client who now needed to seize on an opportunity which required her to fly regularly overseas. Unfortunately, she was terrified of flying. We soon established that her fear came, not from the possibility of crashing, but from a deep-seated claustrophobia. She was comfortable on an airplane until the moment that the door closed. Then her fear kicked in. The same thing happened on trains. When the doors closed, fear took over.

So, I had her spend a Saturday riding the local light rail. She bought a day pass at a station which was less than a mile from the next stop. Knowing that she could get off in less than two minutes allowed her to keep her panic in check when the doors closed. She spent the first part of the day riding back and forth between those two stations, until that short ride was within her comfort zone. Later in the morning she added another stop to her back-and-forth routine. Then another.

Within two weeks she was riding the entire system without a problem. And two months later she made her first overseas flight without an inkling of fear. What we had done was stretch her comfort zone little by little until it was far larger than she had ever thought possible. And she both learned and grew immensely in the process.

So, what have you gleaned from today's program? Are you clear on your best way to learn and the best time of day for you to learn? Whatever your learning approach, are you cross-fertilizing it by purposefully exploring topics outside of your primary interests and activities? And are you regularly looking for opportunities to stretch your comfort zone so that it grows steadily larger? These habits may not make you a billionaire, like the men we noted earlier. But these habits will clearly make your personal and professional life much richer.

Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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