

How Lifelong Learning Helps Leaders Excel

Four Traits Which Empower Their Success

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As a podcaster, I have to make certain assumptions about the people who listen and why they listen. For example, the fact that you are willing to spend time with a podcast on leadership suggests one of two things. Either you are a leader yourself. Or you want to become one.

Then there's a further assumption that you genuinely desire to be more effective as a leader. Why else would you choose a podcast entitled *Upsize Your Leadership*?

I therefore assume that I'm speaking to people who want to learn. Which brings me to the topic for today's episode. As a leadership specialist, I've personally coached over 600 executives, managers, and entrepreneurs. Dozens of them were exceptional lifelong learners. Indeed, their lifelong learning was a major contributor to their stellar achievements, not just as leaders, but elsewhere in life, as well.

In every instance, these men and women embodied four vital traits which anchored their success as lifelong learners. Today's episode looks at the importance of lifelong learning. And then it examines each of these four traits at length, all with an eye to helping you upsize your leadership.

Leadership has been around for thousands of years. It's one of the oldest roles in human society. Even the most primitive village needed someone to assign duties within the tribe, organize hunting expeditions, guide the building or repair of structures, and settle disagreements. Mankind has been learning how to lead since the dawn of civilization.

And we are still learning. **Every advance in society and technology adds greater complexity to human existence. And added complexity puts new demands on leaders.** One day thousands of years ago, those primitive tribal hunting parties gave rise to armed bands of warriors. Fighting bands of warriors eventually grew into armies. Combat led to military conquest. Conquests led to kingdoms. And kingdoms led to empire building.

With each of these transitions, leadership had to master a new set of skills, new ways of doing its job. That same learning process is still underway today. The difference is that in the modern world, the pace at which we need to learn has accelerated exponentially. Change is

occurring so rapidly that the march of complexity is relentless. And complexity is forever reshaping the leadership landscape. To adapt to these ever-changing realities, today's leader has no choice but to be a lifelong learner.

Recognizing that reality, some who are listening have already committed themselves seriously to lifelong learning. They practice it. They embrace. They've made it part of who they are.

If you're one of these people, congratulations. You have embarked on a pathway brimming with rewards. I know. I've traveled that pathway for decades myself.

However, since you are already traveling that path, you might question whether this episode has any relevance to you. Let me assure you that it does. Lifelong learning has been a priority for me since my earliest adulthood. Yet periodically I need to be reminded of the very points which we are addressing today. These reminders help me stay focused and on track. This podcast can do the same for you.

Or perhaps you fall in a slightly different category. You fully recognize the value of lifelong learning. But you're not yet fully engaged in it. Your approach to learning is somewhat haphazard, something of an off-and-on affair. You have never translated your desire to learn into a plan of action which you consistently pursue. If this sounds a bit like you, this episode will strengthen your resolve and determination to develop the consistency which you need to move forward with a solid learning plan.

On the other hand, you may have a strong aspiration to lead, but don't readily see lifelong learning as necessary. You've been reasonably successful by merely drawing on your considerable natural abilities and instincts. You've succeeded to this point without a strong commitment to lifelong learning.

Not that you neglect learning altogether. You do occasionally listen to podcasts, watch videos, sit in on webinars, or read blogs to improve your skill set. But it's largely a spur of the moment thing, usually in response to some topic or headline which suddenly catches your eye. It's not a systematic approach to learning. And what you look for primarily in these spur-of-the-moment learning experiences is some tidbit here or there which will tweak your day-to-day performance. You're looking more for immediately useful techniques than for long-range self-improvement.

In your case, my goal today is to show you the benefits which you tap into by joining others on the pathway of lifelong learning. Only lifelong learning prepares us for the unexpected and disruptive challenges which may confront us as leaders. And in a world where complexity is accelerating, we can never fully anticipate when those disruptive challenges will appear or what they may be.

Louis Pasteur, the father of microbiology, astutely said, "Chance favors the prepared mind." We might substitute the word "opportunity" for "chance," and the statement would be equally true. **"Opportunity favors the prepared mind."**

Monumental achievements by great leaders often result from the leader acting opportunistically. Yet, without a prepared mind, the leader might well be unable to seize on the opportunity or might miss it altogether.

This point was driven home to me years ago in an interchange with Vice-Admiral Joseph Metcalf. In 1983, he led the invasion of Grenada to protect 650 American medical students

whose lives were threatened by a violent Marxist takeover of the island. There was little time to waste, and the White House responded to the takeover by deciding to invade immediately.

Only 39 hours before the invasion was to launch, Admiral Metcalf was tasked to command it. The operation was to be quite complex, involving elements of every branch of the American armed forces and several Caribbean nations. And because the island was so small and because there were so many civilians in harm's way, the field of battle would be rather constricted. As a result, the forces in the invasion would have to operate in tight proximity to each other without getting in one another's way. Detailed coordination would be essential.

A number of months later, I attended a briefing by Admiral Metcalf at the Defense Intelligence Agency. He spoke primarily about the lessons learned from the operation, which exposed deadly flaws in communication links between Army, Navy, and Air Force combat units fighting side-by-side. After briefing us on the lessons learned, he opened the discussion to questions. That's when someone asked, "Admiral, how do you get ready to take 6000 people to war in less than two days?"

Probably everyone in the room expected a lengthy, reflective account of how he used those 39 hours. Instead, we got a two-sentence and immediate response. "I didn't get ready in two days," he said. "I had been getting ready for 27 years." To paraphrase Pasteur again, opportunity favors the prepared mind.

Like Admiral Metcalf, I'm personally committed to the process of lifelong learning. And perhaps you are, too. But what does it mean, exactly, to be a lifelong learner? It's a nice-sounding phrase. But what does lifelong learning look like? And how do you go about implementing that kind of lifestyle? These are vital questions. And we turn to them next.

Of course, I'm hardly the first person to suggest that leaders must be lifelong learners. Countless books, blogs, and podcasts press this very point. But many of them do little more than advocate for lifelong learning. They stop short of mapping a way for you to be a lifelong learner.

I want to go farther than that. I want to draw on lessons which I've learned from years of being around leaders who are themselves lifelong learners. In particular, I want to emphasize four traits which they have in common. They share other traits, to be sure. But these four are essential to their success at making lifelong learning a way of life.

The first trait is an insatiable desire to improve. And I emphasize "insatiable desire." Most people say that they would like to be markedly better at what they do. But relatively few make a determined effort to step up their game significantly. They may occasionally dabble in self-improvement. But they never generate a sustained drive to pursue it. As a result, they may learn off and on over their lifetime. But they are not genuinely lifelong learners. Lifelong learning requires more than a casual commitment to self-improvement. It demands a deep-seated desire.

If you lack that desire, how do you develop it? The most effective way is to devote your leadership energy, whenever possible, to projects, initiatives, and causes which you care about passionately. The deeper our passion for what we undertake, the more motivated we are to do it well. This motivation then provokes a hunger to develop skills and insights which would maximize our capabilities. And working together, this underlying passion and motivation make it far easier to carve out and protect specific times dedicated to self-development.

The most common self-development exercise is reading. Some of the most avid readers I've ever known are CEOs of giant corporations. The amount of reading which they do for self-development is nothing short of amazing, especially considering all of the other reading which their job demands. With their exhausting, demanding schedules, how do they find the drive to maintain such prolific reading habits?

To a person, I've found, one of their greatest motivations is the passion which they have for their company or their industry. They are simply unwilling to settle for so-so performance. They read or they listen to audio books to enhance their impact.

One day I was in a meeting with the CEO of a Fortune 200 company. As we were wrapping up, I handed him a copy of my latest book. He looked at it, pushed it into his computer bag, and said, "I won't put this one on the stack. I'll read it this afternoon on my flight." "What's the stack?" I asked. He pointed to a corner of his office. There, tucked away almost out of sight, were two stacks of books, both about two feet tall. "The books on the right are ones which I've recently read," he said. The ones on the left are one's that I'm planning to read soon. But I won't put your book on the stack. I'll read it today."

I've known few people who speak more enthusiastically and passionately about their industry than this man. And that passion had driven him to be the consummate learner. Little wonder, then, that his company maintains a stellar record for being superbly run.

Sometimes the motivation for self-improvement is driven by a passion, not for what a person is doing today, but for what he or she aspires to do tomorrow. Another avid reader, and a man who was one of my closest personal friends, was the CEO and chairman of a global company, with multimillion-dollar projects on six continents. He dreamed of amassing a fortune over his professional career so that, in retirement, he could devote that money to a particular community project which he loved. As much as anything, his passion for that distant, future project drove him to make his company as successful as possible. And that drive motivated him to be a lifelong learner.

For others this passion for some future possibility comes from a desire to start their own business. Or a desire to someday be a C-level executive. Or simply a desire to give their family the benefits of an early and comfortable retirement. People always seem to find time to learn more about what stirs their passion. Tie your self-improvement goals to your passion and time for learning will make its way into your schedule.

The second trait of lifelong learners is a willingness to protect set blocs of time for self-improvement. Many of the most successful executives and entrepreneurs whom I've coached make that time every morning. I used to meet the CEO of a global company quite regularly for breakfast at 7 a.m. On most days, he had already spent an hour— and sometimes longer — on his self-improvement reading plan. Fortunately, he was not a late-night person, so he could follow this schedule without unduly losing sleep.

Perhaps your schedule rules out mornings for self-development. Or you just may not be a morning person. That's okay. Self-improvement can happen at any time of the day. Find a time that usually works well for you, even if it's no more than fifteen minutes long. Then rigorously protect that time for self-development. If your learning strategy includes having a coach or mentor, make every effort never to postpone a session. And be punctual in completing assignments between sessions.

In a word, lifelong learning is not about merely learning things which happen to chance by in the haphazard patterns of life. It is a purposeful, planned approach to on-going enrichment and development. If your schedule won't permit you to protect a given learning time each day, then set aside one or more times for it every week. Or make it part of your weekend routine. The precise schedule is far less important than having one. Put it on your calendar, along with your other appointments. Treat it seriously. Otherwise, your faithful follow-through is likely to tail off.

The third trait is humility. We not only learn from what we read, listen to, or watch, we also learn from feedback, from people's casual comments, and from what we learn when we fail at a critical task. When the feedback is adverse or when the failure is embarrassing, our natural instinct is to become defensive. But none of us learns in a defensive posture. Defensiveness causes us to shut down both psychologically and emotionally. And we don't learn in that state. We learn by being open and having the humility to accept the things which we need to change in ourselves.

Humility is never a sign of weakness. It is a sign of deep resilience and strength. Anyone can become defensive in the face of setbacks. It takes genuine character and courage to face one's shortcomings and set out to transcend them. Arrogant people learn little from day-to-day experience. They lack the humility to do so.

Fourth, lifelong learners need to stoke their curiosity. Nothing encourages us to expand the scope and depth of our learning more than avid curiosity. Curiosity may have killed the cat, as the old proverb says, but it has sparked many a brilliant breakthrough on the part of innovators and leaders. Albert Einstein famously said, "I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious."

Curiosity is marked by questions such as "Why has this happened?", "How would I go about doing X?", "What if we looked at it from a totally different perspective?", "Wonder how Company ABC has accomplished what they've done?", "What assumptions have we made that we may need to re-examine?", and "What's really going on beneath what's going on?" Questions are the soul of curiosity. If we are not routinely asking questions, both of ourselves, of others, and of the world, we are not genuinely curious.

For people who are inclined toward curiosity, there has never been a better time to live. Almost anything we want to learn is as close as the nearest computer keyboard . . . or even closer, on our smart phone. The problem is, there is so much information readily available that it can be overwhelming, even in our own field of specialization.

We therefore have to be discriminating learners. One of my professors in college often encouraged his students to read "widely, wisely, and well." He would repeat that phrase several times a semester. His encouragement to read wisely is especially germane to lifelong learning. If we do not choose our learning experiences wisely, we could devote untold hours to reading, listening, or viewing, only to have learned nothing of particular benefit to us. Or we may come across something truly beneficial, but fail to retain it.

The learning which we are most likely to retain and make use of is learning spurred by curiosity. When we are in a state of genuine curiosity, the synapses of the brain actually open up and become super-sensitized. They are poised to take in new learnings and to do so fully. None of us has unlimited time for learning. We need to make the best use of the time available. And one of the best ways to do that is to pay special attention to topics which stoke our curiosity.

Let's summarize, then. If you're going to Upsize Your Leadership by being a lifelong learner, you need to 1) nurture an insatiable desire for self-improvement; 2) be willing to set aside and protect time to devote to your self-improvement; 3) have the humility to learn from feedback and mistakes; and 4) maintain an outlook of avid curiosity.

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