

The Leader as Learner

There was a time when only the most senior and the most junior organizational leaders really made learning a priority.

Senior leaders learned because they were responsible for crafting a competitive business strategy, and junior leaders learned because they were seeking to earn their place in the organization. Today, learning is every leader's business. We are in the early stages of a digital global economy that is completely dismantling and recreating our existing social and financial frameworks. Markets are volatile, talent is in short supply, information is rapidly, and broadly dispersed, and traditional organizations are flattening and losing their boundaries. Leaders can no longer simply rely upon their positional power, domain knowledge, technical expertise, and exclusive access to information. They now need to become great learners as well.

The rapid rate of change means that leaders cannot act solely on what they know. They need to act on what they learn. They need to shift from leading from knowledge to leading from learning. And this is easier said than done. Think of it as the difference between playing a single game of checkers against a well-known opponent and playing several, simultaneous games of three-dimensional chess against opponents that have never been previously encountered. It is that difficult, but it can be done.

Leadership and learning are synonymous today. When you look at extraordinarily successful leaders, you are also looking at phenomenally successful learners. If you want to be one, make note of the practices that set these leaders apart.

1. **An Opportunistic Bias** – these leaders believe that they can be instrumental in creating a tomorrow that will be better than today. They welcome all relevant information, good or bad, because they believe that the environment will always be brimming with both unknown opportunities and unknown dangers and that they have the ability to lead their organizations safely around the dangers and into the opportunities. They are sponges for knowledge, seeking it out from many sources. They are not threatened by information regardless of how bleak because of the innate sense of confidence they have in themselves and their organization. Intentionally or unintentionally, leaders without this optimistic bias often suppress fresh information, taking comfort in their belief that “No news is good news.”
2. **Premeditated Agility** – these leaders assume that they are wrong! They craft the best plans possible and then set out to execute these plans with the attitude that they are inherently flawed, and that success will depend on their ability to rapidly adapt to surprises, upsets, and unexpected good fortune. This is not easy. For leaders to adopt the notion that their best thinking is defective in some way and will need to be corrected requires a lack of ego from the leader and exceptional confidence in their organization and in those whom they lead.

3. **Emotional Strength** – these leaders can let go and move on! They have the inner strength and maturity to be able to abandon closely-held (and dearly loved) assumptions, beliefs, and mental models, and suffer the inevitable pain associated with learning and changing. Again, this is not easy, particularly because the things the leader needs to release are often those things that have been most instrumental in their success to date. It's a lot easier to let go of the things that we know are not working than the things we have relied on to get us here.
4. **Reversed Perspective** – these leaders see through the eyes of others! They have the capacity and courage to honestly look at themselves, their organizations, and their businesses as their staff, customers, suppliers, and others do. Leaders who do this well are not simply sensitive to the thinking of others; they are radically empathetic. They get outside of themselves (an exceedingly difficult process) and experience life as others do (an even more difficult task).
5. **Unfair Intelligence** – these leaders hear things others do not! Because they operate with noble intentions, they can boldly dive into uncertain, risky dialogues from which they gain highly valuable and often exclusive insights and ideas. These leaders see everyone they meet as an untapped reservoir of information and knowledge and set about to extract the maximum amount of learning from every conversation in which they engage.

The good news is that there is nothing on this list that is beyond the reach of all who seek to lead.

There is really no mystery to becoming a true learner, just a big commitment and hard work. But the price you pay will pale in comparison to that paid by those who do not follow you on this road. Look around you. Leaders who fail often do so because they base their actions on outdated knowledge and irrelevant models. They lead by looking behind rather than ahead. Where are you looking? What are you learning?

A good leadership litmus test lies in the answers to these simple questions:

1. What was the most important thing you learned about authenticity?
2. What was the most important thing you learned about coaching?
3. What was the most important thing you learned about communication?
4. What was the most important thing you learned about others?
5. What was the most important thing you learned about yourself?