



Never stop learning

According to leadership specialists, more than raw talent, the ability to **accumulate experiences and learn something from each one** is what makes for great leaders and managers. Gradually expanding the scope of your responsibilities or taking on a variety of assignments are thus recommended development strategies. But you can also learn a lot from situations encountered in your everyday work, such as attending a high-stakes meeting, helping to resolve a conflict between two subordinates, making a difficult decision, dealing with a political setback or a market downturn, etc.

A proactive approach
is needed to learn from
experience.

Yet, **simply living through experiences does not make them formative**. Indeed, being thrown into the pool is not sufficient to learn how to swim! Unless you take proactive measures to learn from your experiences, you may not necessarily draw any useful lessons from them. Managers are generally under a lot of pressure to focus on immediate performance. When they

are faced with an unfamiliar problem, they tend to fall back on what they know, because this is more comfortable and less uncertain than trying a new approach that they haven't mastered. However, this reflex impedes learning.

Hence, to learn from experience, three conditions must be met:

Be deliberate

Time is the enemy of learning in pressure-filled professional environments. **How can we take the time to learn from our experience** when we are driven every day to move on to the next objective and the next project? Do we really have the luxury to try new ways of doing things, even though they may be less effective in the short term? In fact, without a very strong drive to withstand pressure to move quickly, managers tend to rapidly focus on the next challenge, and thus miss out on the opportunity to learn from what has just happened.

Be methodical

It is not enough to want to learn from your experiences. Indeed, experience can be a bad teacher if it is misinterpreted. For example, a biotechnology company credited the positive results of a new product to the technological

features applauded by its customers. The company thus applied the same approach in launching its next product, which turned out to be a huge flop! The company's mistake was omitting to integrate a number of external factors when analyzing the first experience. In this particular case, the bankruptcy of a competitor had had a major impact on sales, but this was not taken into account. As a result, the biased analysis of the reasons for success led the company directly to failure. Indeed, our biases can easily lead us to draw the wrong conclusions from our experience. It is consequently very important to **be very methodical when drawing lessons from experience**.

Be perseverant

Modifying your behavior or mindset sustainably takes a lot of willpower. Indeed, when the pressure is on, you will naturally tend to fall back on the same old reflexes. Going against the grain to create new reflexes thus requires that you **persevere over time to change your behavior permanently**.

Five attitudes influence
our ability to learn from
our experience:

- 1 Try to learn from **every situation**
- 2 Methodically conduct **objective analyses**
- 3 Seek **external perspectives**
- 4 Venture outside your **comfort zone**
- 5 **Decide to change** – and stick to it

1st attitude

Try to learn from **every situation**

Target your efforts

Be on the lookout for development opportunities that can help you build your influence in the organization:

- **What makes leaders valuable in your industry?**
e.g.: Deep expertise, large network of contacts, ability to manage large units, etc.
- **What types of critical situations must leaders be able to manage?**
e.g.: Conduct multipartite negotiations, make quick decisions discreetly, etc.
- **What does this mean in personal terms?**
e.g.: Resistance to pressure, ability to innovate in a hypercompetitive environment, political savvy, etc.

The ability to learn from experience is primarily a **state of mind**. Leaders who stay at the top are those who try to learn from every situation, interesting or not, exceptional or ordinary. Naturally, we learn more spontaneously when the situation itself is stimulating—a new job, a meeting with a renowned expert, a crisis, etc. When we are confronted with new situations, we naturally tend to ask ourselves questions that trigger learning, such as: How should I react in these kinds of situations? What did I take away from this meeting? What conclusions can I draw for the future?

However, leaders remarkable for their adaptability don't restrict their observations to exceptional situations.

We learn only what we want to learn.

They take every opportunity to learn, including in situations that may not seem particularly interesting. A boring executive committee meeting can thus be an opportunity to observe each member and refine your understanding of political games. The obligation to

prepare a report could be a good chance to work on presenting and communicating data more effectively and

thereby better persuade others. Harvey Golub, former leader of American Express, turned every decision into an opportunity to challenge conventional thinking and assumptions. This mindset will help you capitalize on everyday situations to challenge the status quo and continue learning throughout your career.

Combine different learning tactics

ACTION	Deliberately face challenges , e.g., invite, rather than exclude, a project opponent to a meeting to reinforce your conflict management skills.
REFLECTION	Analyze , make comparisons, imagine what could have gone differently, etc., e.g., In the event of conflict, look for history, imagine various resolution scenarios, seek additional information, etc.
EMOTIONAL ANALYSIS	Consider how you and other stakeholders feel about the situation and how these feelings affect it, e.g., How do you manage the stress connected with this conflict? How does stress influence your reactions?
CONSULTING OTHERS	Seek external input on your attitudes and behaviors, such as a sounding board, advice, examples, directives, etc., e.g., Talk about conflict management with your boss, ask a coach to debrief you, etc.

Based on **Developmental Assignments**, Cynthia D. McCauley, Center for Creative Leadership, 2006.

2nd attitude

Methodically conduct **objective analyses**

Analyze objectively

At the start of the day:

- What situation is likely to be the most challenging today? Which particular obstacles or **pitfalls** should I looking out for?
- What **new things** can I try in order to learn and develop? e.g., Networking, behavior with subordinates, creativity in the way I approach things, etc.

At the end of the day:

- What happened today that was particularly **remarkable**?
- What **positive results** did I achieve?
- What could I have done **differently**?

To turn every experience into a learning opportunity, you must provide yourself with a framework to practice regularly. Indeed, unless we establish a regular routine and make appointments with ourselves, the pressure of everyday emergencies naturally takes over. For example, you can keep a learning journal to note down each day's highlights and the thoughts that spring to mind. You can then consult this journal as a reliable record of events to combat the natural tendency to reconstruct the past. Other

Learning to pause and take stock is essential to derive the full benefit of experience.

leaders make a point to start or end each day by taking pause to reflect upon what they need to do and calmly put the day's events into perspective. Companies

such as Google, Hughes Aircraft and Deutsche Bank have even started meditation classes for their employees to help them collect their

thoughts. Another approach, used at Pixar for example, is to hold a **systematic debriefing** session after project end to capitalize on the experience. This exercise does not necessarily have to be long; regularity is the key.

3rd attitude

Seek external perspectives

Going through an experience is not enough to learn from it. To learn from encountered situations, we must **thoroughly analyze them to understand what actually transpired**. For example, what triggered the conflict that disrupted the joint works council meeting? What was my share of responsibility in the escalation of this conflict? How did I react when attacked by a particularly virulent employee representative? How did my counterparts react to my choice of words, my body language, my facial expressions, or even my silence?

The right feedback at the right time exponentially increases the formative value of experience.

This type of exercise is **very difficult** because many factors limit individual perception and comprehension of a given situation. For example, old company hands might be able to help you understand a given conflict better by putting it in the context of past tensions. Indeed, you rarely have all the information you need to decipher the reactions of everyone concerned in a conflict. As a result, you may easily misinterpret their behavior and come to erroneous conclusions about the impact of your actions. For instance, the newly-pro-

moted head of operations at one company was shocked by the hostility of the other management committee members. After speaking with the CEO, he realized that the cause was not his personal style and projects, as he initially thought, but rather a longstanding battle of wills between the finance director and the head of marketing. This revelation helped him distinguish between the impact of his own actions and the ambient

context. Armed with this knowledge, he immediately focused on grasping the political situation and building his own network, areas

which he would have otherwise neglected for much too long.

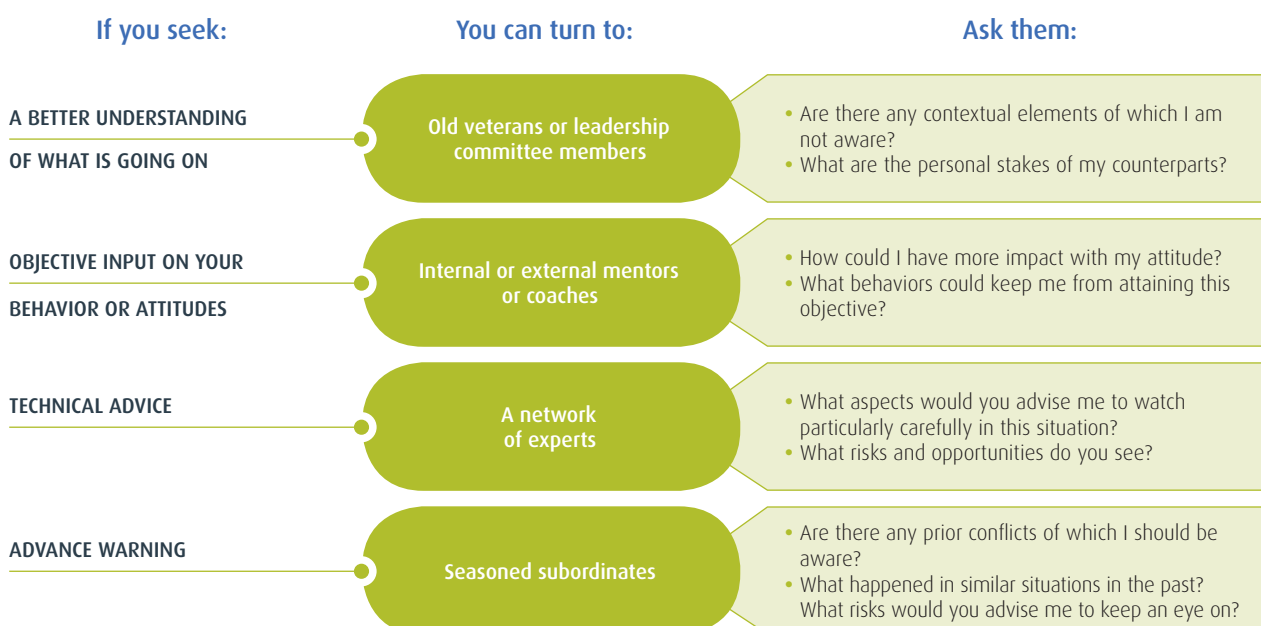
Getting an external perspective will also help you **respond more appropriately in unfamiliar situations**. People learn most often when they confront unknown situations and test new approaches. Seasoned veterans can thus provide extremely valuable advice to help you navigate unfamiliar territory, while minimizing your risk of failure. Learning is greatly accelerated when you take opportunities to try new approaches wisely.

Seek help

The help you receive depends on your sincere willingness to be influenced.

- **Explain what you value in others.**
e.g.: Expertise, experience, knowledge of internal politics, critical perspective, etc.
- **Actively seek out their help.**
e.g.: Set aside time to listen to them; ask them to help you on a given subject, etc.
- **Express your gratitude.**
e.g.: Show that you have taken their input into consideration; thank them for their time and effort.

Whom can you turn to for help?



4th attitude

Venture outside your **comfort zone**

Accelerate your development

- **Set periodic challenges for yourself.**
e.g.: Ask your team to resolve a challenging problem; make a point of restoring trust with a difficult subordinate.
- **Make your job more interesting.**
e.g.: Take over a sensitive project; track the most disgruntled customers; exchange a responsibility with a colleague.
- **Seize external opportunities.**
e.g.: Work on a strategic plan for an association; volunteer to be a mediator for a local cause.

Based on *Developmental Assignments*, Cynthia D. McCauley, Center for Creative Leadership, 2006.

The situations most conducive to learning are uncomfortable. Indeed, we learn most intensively when we are confronted with a performance objective that forces us to go beyond the frontiers of what we already know how to do well. The resulting tension is doubly beneficial. First, we have no choice other than to try new approaches. Second, the emotional intensity created by our necessarily strong involvement helps us deeply internalize the lessons learned from the experience. As Edgar Schein underlines in the article *The Anxiety of Learning*, learning is not a picnic. To the contrary, **people learn best when they are forced outside their comfort zone.**

From a personal viewpoint, this means you must leave yourself open and take the risk of doing a mediocre job. For example, you could apply for an assignment for which you don't have all

of the required qualifications or focus on aspects of your job with which you are the least comfortable and confident.

Moving outside your comfort zone also means you must **combat your natural reflexes**. Are you nervous in public? Offer to make a speech at the next marketing convention. You don't like conflict? Force yourself to

respond to a union representative the next time he raises a prickly subject.

Even so, self-exposure must be done with moderation. Indeed, if you become too stressed, you may lose your footing completely, not to mention suffer from great emotional distress. What is more, you may be more or less able to handle the additional tension created by learning situations at different points in your life or career. So, take careful stock of how much you can take to avoid the boomerang effect.

There is no learning without taking risks.

"Managers learn in so far as they have no choice but to take action on problems, as doing nothing would be unacceptable."

The Lessons of Experience, Morgan W. McCall, Michael M. Lombardo, Ann M. Morrison, Free Press, 1988.

5th attitude

Decide to change and stick to it

How to persevere?

- **Be clear about your change priorities.**
e.g.: A behavior, your performance in a given domain, your relationship with a given group of people, etc.
- **Identify concrete signs** that will indicate you are making progress.
- **Create warning signals** to help you avoid falling back into your old routine.
- **Identify the benefits you will derive from the change.** e.g.: Recognition from your peers, better integration of your opinions, etc.

It takes perseverance to practice what you have learned from experience. Indeed, although some lessons may bear fruit immediately, simply by virtue of the new awareness you've acquired, others take more time to materialize. The experts estimate that on average, it takes six months to sustainably change a behavior. Likewise, consolidating your network or building your influence takes time. That is why you are advised to **establish concrete objectives and deadlines** for achieving them. For example, you could set a short-term objective to have lunch with every member of the steering committee within the next six weeks. Then, in the

medium term, you could aim to have an informal discussion at least once a month with every department head concerned by a particular project. By making contracts with yourself, you ensure that you will go beyond merely learning from experience and actually take concrete action to change your practices sustainably.

A good way to oblige yourself to walk the talk

is to share **this contract with someone you trust**. This could be a colleague who could let you know if you are falling back into your old habits, or someone close to you with whom you can share your thoughts and who can provide encouragement over time.

Learning is built through deliberate practice.