

On Being a Serial Learner:

Five Ways to Transition From Version 2.0 to 3.0 and Beyond

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“He that will not apply new remedies must expect new evils; for time is the greatest innovator.”
—Francis Bacon

There’s an executive we know whom we’ll call Martin. He and his organization have prospered these past ten years. His margins are reasonable and his stakeholders are satisfied. This has produced a “we know what we need to know” mindset. Martin doesn’t appear to push himself, his organization or direct reports to implement new things or explore fresh ideas. He demonstrates a lack of interest in increasing his experience and knowledge.

Compare Martin to David. They are peers in every way but one. David is impatient to find a better way, explore new ideas and opportunities, and soak up additional knowledge. David is what we call a serial learner, someone who is always striving to improve. He recognizes that the world is so fickle, so highly unpredictable and fast-paced, that he must become and remain a perpetual student. Otherwise, the risk is that he will be quickly left behind.

Through this thirst for knowledge and application of learning, David has upgraded himself to Version 3.0—and he’s not done. He is on a lifelong quest to learn. Martin, on the other hand, has a 2.0 mindset. He doesn’t see the need or the benefits, nor has he developed the discipline for continuous learning and stretching himself.

Think of success as a train moving at high speed. If you uncouple the last car, it and the rest of the train will keep moving. However, that last car will eventually lose momentum and get left behind. To keep our own momentum and success going, we must continuously learn as we go, question the information we see, and adapt as needed.

All ideas, processes, and technologies have an expiration date. The desire and capacity to learn will help you, your associates and your organization stay ahead of the curve. You need to try out new ideas, having the courage to incorporate those that work and abandoning those that don’t. Otherwise, you and your organization become the uncoupled car. You will keep going for a while, but will become increasingly less relevant, trying to sell yesterday’s ideas into tomorrow’s world.

Mental, strategic, and tactical agility are critical at any age and stage of your career. Change is inevitable, and there’s a good chance what you’re doing today won’t drive future success. Ironically, the dynamic industries that are particularly successful now are perhaps most vulnerable to competitive pressure to change. For example, Samsung, the South Korean conglomerate that has long dominated the Android phone market, is now under significant

pressure from Xiaomi, a Chinese handset maker. Xiaomi turns out new cell phone modifications on an eight-to-twelve-week cycle. Xiaomi is in a continuous competitive learn-do mode, talking with potential customers and incorporating what it has learned into new options.

So why do individuals and organizations resist learning and its benefits? The fast-paced, multimodal world of information actually goes against the kind of effective learning that will be strategically profitable to you and your organization. We are constantly bombarded with data that is often trite, inaccurate, incomplete and irrelevant. Yet we become captured by this quick-hitting style. It does not invite reflection, assimilation or assessment. We consume digital junk food, quickly gobbling but not digesting morsels of information. We hunger for the next fix rather than thinking about the relevance (or lack thereof) of the information we've taken in.

For continued success, we need to push back on these tendencies, being mindful and selective about what we learn. This involves developing the skill of reflection and the ability to assimilate information into our knowledge base and routine. One could argue that we have forgotten the actual purpose of learning: to prepare ourselves for a future that will be unforgiving in its demands for change, and will punish those who cling to the past.

The difference between a Version 2.0 and 3.0 mindset is about effort, ambition, drive and goals. You need to ask yourself what it is you want to be, where you need your organization's success to go, and what information you need to make that happen. This is a continuous process, not something you only do early in your career or at a key inflection point.

So, how can you counter this cultural and personal pressure to find the space and time to upgrade your talents to Version 3.0 and beyond?

1. Develop a plan. All professional learning has an aim, whether for you, the organization, or both.
2. Ask yourself, "Am I learning something that will be of benefit to my plan?" If that's the case, then increase your time and energy. If not, then move on.
3. Actively tie in the newly learned information with your goals for self-development and organizational betterment. You must see or drive the connections, for this is where actual, practical creativity is the most robust.
4. Try out a new idea in some form to see if it is accurate, viable and useable. Often, new ideas need to be adapted, adjusted and altered to fit the realities of the circumstance you face. That, in and of itself, is a powerful learning habit.

For instance, a client was negotiating to purchase another organization. His vision for the proposed acquisition was out of step with that of the present owner. Thus, the bid was met with rejection, if not ridicule. He listened to the owner and used the feedback to pivot quickly from this failure to craft a successful proposal. It reflected the owner's deeply held beliefs. Doing so did not require more money, but the ability to see things from another's perspective.

5. Monitor and measure your learning-related actions on an ongoing basis. This feedback will let you know if you're on target, or whether the idea is not presently fully feasible for you or your organization. It's not always about abandoning an idea. There are times when it will be about realizing that the infrastructure and the organization can't digest and utilize it at present.

For ongoing achievement, as well as professional and organizational relevance, serial learning that is agile, adaptive and pragmatic is a critical success factor. Learning, doing, adjusting and redoing will drive outcomes that are effective now and promote future growth, taking you and your organization from Version 2.0 to 3.0 and beyond.

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