

9: Continuous Learning

Learning Objectives

- Understand how continuous learning can help you achieve career and personal success.

Continuous learning involves the process of constantly trying to update skills and learn new ones. This shows high emotional intelligence in the area of self-awareness and self-management (“I know I need to learn this new skill to be more valuable to my employee or to be more productive in my personal life”). Having self-awareness, or knowing our strengths and weaknesses, is the first step in improving our chances for career and personal success. Once we are aware (self-aware) of our weaknesses, we can better choose areas in which we would like to learn. For example, if Anton knows he isn’t very good at giving presentations, being able to recognize this is self-awareness. Then, finding opportunities to work on this, such as joining a Toastmasters club, shows emotional intelligence in the area of self-management. Anton recognized his weakness and finds ways to improve his abilities.

People who often learn new skills tend to be happier individuals and more value to their organizations. For example, Zappos, a shoe retailer based in Seattle, Washington, maintains a “Wishez” list. Employees post things they are interested in learning, such as how to cook an ethnic dish, and they are connected with other members in the organization who have these skills. This focus on continuous learning makes for happier employees, which makes for more productive workers. In a study by Kansas State University, it was estimated that happy workers are in fact, more productive. The study found that employees who are psychologically distressed cost \$75+ per week to the organization.^[1]

Learning new skills such as taking a pottery class or learning to ski or surf can help people increase happiness, which in turn can build self-confidence. This confidence can result in a richer and more fulfilling life since we learn new things that we enjoy doing.

Most people who find career success have a habit of being curious and interested in a variety of topics that can enhance their personal lives but also their professional lives, too. As management guru Brian Tracy points out, continuous learning is one of the “nine disciplines” to being successful.^[2] But what does it mean to learn continuously? There are several ways we can learn, as depicted in Figure 9.1.

Seminars and Workshops	Attending a workshop can improve skills in a specific area. It could be related to your field or completely unrelated.
Read	Books, magazines, and websites about your industry can keep you abreast of any changes. Listening to educational programs on your iPod while running or in your car, for example, can enhance learning.
Conventions	Attending conventions in your field can broaden knowledge and provide important contacts and networking opportunities.
Coaching and Mentoring	If your company does not have a formal mentoring program, find someone who you admire and someone who is successful and learn from them.
Travel	Travel helps broaden our experience.
Socially	Spend time with friends! We can learn about ourselves through our friends and close relationships.

Figure 9.1 Some Suggestions for

Continual Learning

From a career perspective, if we choose not to learn continuously, we end up being stale in both our skills and abilities. Since most industries change so quickly, it is likely our current skills will be outdated in five to ten years. This means we need to constantly update to understand the next set of skills we need to be successful. In addition, sometimes we have to “unlearn” skills as new and better ways evolve. For example, if you have golfed before, you may mimic the golf swings you see on television when you go out to play. Although this swing may work for you for some time, you may get to a point where you want to improve, so you take a lesson from a golf pro. The golf pro looks at your swing and offers advice on how to improve distance and accuracy. In this case, you may have to “unlearn” your old swing in order to improve your golf game. Unlearning can apply to all aspects of our life, not just sports. When things in an organization change, it can be challenging to unlearn the old way and be comfortable with the new way of doing things. Unlearning means you may have to let go of an old way of doing something that may have worked for a long period of time. For example, Parelli Natural Horsemanship program requires training participants to start from square one when learning how to train their horse.^[3] The idea is they need to “unlearn” their old ways of training their horse in order to become effective at the sport. So no matter if someone has ten years of experience with horses or zero years, everyone goes back to basics. This can happen in organizations, too. For example, an organization that had high sales in 2007 had to unlearn their way of doing business before the recession in order to continue being successful. A new economy has required relearning of how to operate with many economic changes. In society today, the ability to learn, unlearn, and then learn again can happen over a span of a few months rather than many years. For example, many organizations get “stuck” on a specific way of doing things, and when those things are unlearned, the company can begin to move forward and learn the new way of doing things.

Many organizations value people who can show their focus and dedication to continually learning and unlearning. For example, the Office of Personnel Management of the US Fish and Wildlife Service employs over 9,000^[4] people. Because of their large staff, they have identified twenty-eight leadership competencies, one of which is continual learning. Continual learning is important because it makes us more valuable to our employers, which can result in promotions, higher salary, and more responsibility as we grow our career.

Brian Tracy Talks about Continuous Learning

(click to see video)

Brian Tracy, management guru, discusses the importance of continuous learning in entrepreneurship.

Continual Learning

Continual learning is valued and expected at all levels with the Fish and Wildlife department. US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Conservation Training Center website. Accessed March 6, 2012, <http://nctc.fws.gov/led/competencymodel/Foundational/continuallearning.html>

Continual Learning Element	Distinguishing behaviors for employees, supervisors, and upper-level management
Values learning and takes initiative to build knowledge and skills.	For All Employees:
	Strives for continuous improvement and is actively engaged in exploring new ideas and concepts.
	Seeks out and engages in self-improvement activities.
	Spends time learning from others.
	Creates time within and away from the job to learn.
	Seeks challenging assignments and unfamiliar tasks.
	Seeks out new developments, techniques, and advances in knowledge and ideas.
	Seeks out new approaches, tools, and methods in their own field of expertise.
	Maintains professional certification or license, if appropriate.
	Additional for First Appointment Leaders and Above:
	Encourages and supports professional growth including pursuit of appropriate certifications and licenses.
	Gives others the autonomy to approach issues in their own way, including the opportunity to make and learn from mistakes.
	Additional for Midlevel Leaders and Above:
	Invests in the further development of personal supervisory skills, in better understanding the issues and needs that affect customers, and in their own field-specific expertise.
	Reinforces knowledge, skills, and new behaviors gained through training and development by helping employees apply them on the job.
Is reflective and learns from mistakes.	Additional for Senior Leaders and Above:
	Models continuous self-development.
	Adds to managerial knowledge, strategic thinking, financial planning and analysis, as well as skills in supporting a learning organization.
	Additional for Executives:
	Continually updates their own and others' awareness of the organization and the big picture context within which we work.
	For All Employees:

Continual Learning Element

Assesses gaps in knowledge and skill in self and in others.

Distinguishing behaviors for employees, supervisors, and upper-level management

Analyzes both successes and failures for clues to improvement.

Is resilient toward setbacks and failures, analyzing them for lessons learned and building on them.

Confronts problems instead of avoiding them.

Additional for First Appointment Leaders and Above:

Uses after-action reviews to assess performance.

Additional for Midlevel Leaders and Above:

Uses a variety of approaches to analyze and understand how actions led to certain outcomes and how to improve one's approach to similar situations in the future.

Is open about mistakes and failure with self and others.

Contributes to procedures that enable the organization to learn from past actions.

Additional for Senior Leaders and Above:

Plans, implements, and learns from program and policy evaluation strategies.

Additional for Executives:

Ensures that new organizational policies, programs, procedures, and services are built to incorporate and profit from lessons learned.

Ensures that stakeholders understand results of policy and program evaluation.

For All Employees:

Assesses their own strengths and weaknesses.

Actively seeks feedback on their performance.

Understands their strengths and potential "fatal flaws" in knowledge and performance.

Additional for First Appointment Leaders and Above:

Recognizes and addresses team and team member strengths and potential "fatal flaws" in knowledge and performance.

Draws on individual team member strengths rather than weaknesses to fashion assignments and help develop others in the team.

Gives decision making authority to the team, where appropriate. Avoids taking over all decisions.

Rewards and recognizes the good use of team skills, not just individual contributions.

Additional for Midlevel Leaders and Above:

Measures current skills and knowledge against competencies needed for continuing success and to meet future problems.

Evaluates the impact of training on performance.

Continual Learning Element	Distinguishing behaviors for employees, supervisors, and upper-level management
Understands the value of knowledge sharing.	For All Employees:
	Actively seeks learning in areas beyond their own technical expertise in order to become a broader resource.
	Participates actively in professional associations(s).
	Additional for First Appointment Leaders and Above:
	Networks with others and supports team networking to share resources and knowledge and builds upon rather than replicate the work of others.
	Additional for Midlevel Leaders and Above:
	Coaches and mentors employees.
	Fosters knowledge sharing and learning across units.
	Actively engages in partnering activities that align common goals and services.
	Serves as a source of wisdom and expertise on technical and organizational matters for employees.
	Additional for Senior Leaders and Above:
	Applies tools and techniques of knowledge management to share learning widely across the organization.
	Identifies best practices from high-performance organizations with similar missions.
Demonstrates knowledge of learning styles and uses a variety of strategies to close learning gaps.	Helps the organization learn from customers and stakeholders and translates that learning into improved ways of performing.
	Additional for Executives:
	Develops processes and/or systems to ensure that what is learned in training or practice is shared throughout the organization and applied to work activities and strategic planning.
	Cooperates and/or networks across disciplinary, organizational, agency and public/private boundaries to establish and reach common understanding on issues and opportunities.
	Promotes benchmarking and other techniques that help an agency build upon best practices.
	Broadly communicates throughout the organization the need to understand others' viewpoints, agendas, values, constraints, and behaviors and be willing to take others' ideas into consideration.
	For All Employees:
	Crafts and uses for their own development a variety of learning approaches, including formal course work, reading, talking with others, attending formal training, shadowing, detail assignments, and on-the-job experiences.
	Understands their preferred learning style and methods.
	Uses the IDP to link assessments, career goals, and organizational strategies to personal development plans.

Continual Learning Element	Distinguishing behaviors for employees, supervisors, and upper-level management
	Works to deploy strengths.
	Additional for First Appointment Leaders and Above:
	Supports the team's use of a variety of learning methods, including reading, talking with others, after-action reviews, attending formal training, and on-the-job experiences.
	Shows insight into individuals' learning profiles and styles when making assignments or devising developmental strategies.
Understands the concept of knowledge management and leads knowledge management efforts.	Identifies and makes assignments that challenge team members to stretch their abilities and self-confidence.
	Additional for Midlevel Leaders and Above:
	Creates and makes developmental assignments to stretch and foster learning and development in employees.
	Delegates responsibility and decision making to lower levels to develop employees.
	Ensures that all employees have an IDP (individual development plan). Links IDPs and developmental assignments to current and future organizational needs.
Integrates the development of human capital into strategic planning and creates an integrated approach to address current problems and meet emerging demands.	For Senior Leaders and Executives:
	Creates an environment that facilitates knowledge sharing, learning, and networking, which can support change.
	Builds the organization's capacity to learn, improve, anticipate, and meet new challenges.
	Designs, implements, and orchestrates knowledge management strategies and initiatives throughout the organization.
	For Senior Leaders and Above:
	Assesses organizational skills and strengths against current and future requirements.
	Manages expenditures for training and development as investments that maximize the value of human capital plans strategically for changing organizational needs in skills and knowledge.

Everyone should consider creating a plan to help them develop their talents and create new skills. The plan might include the following:

- What skill(s) do I want to develop?
- What time frame will I give myself to develop them?
- How much time per week/month can I devote?
- What methods will I use? For example, seminars, classes, and so on.

As we learned in the earlier section on goal setting, being specific and writing down those new skills and abilities you want to develop can tend to make it more of a priority, which can result in more personal and career success.

Key Takeaways

- *Continuous learning* is the process of learning new things to enhance yourself professionally and personally.
- Continuous learning can help increase personal happiness and career success.
- One can engage in continuous learning by taking seminars, workshops, reading, working with a mentor, attending conventions, socializing, and traveling.
- Some organizations, such as the Department of Fish and Wildlife, make continuous learning a part of leadership career pathways.

Exercise 9.1

What new skills would you like to learn? Write down at least five new skills you would like to learn personally. Then write down five new skills you would like to learn for your career. Identify all of the options that can help you develop these new skills.

1. Hodges, Kristin. (2009, February 3). K-state researcher says happy employees are critical for an organization's success. Accessed March 21, 2012, www.k-state.edu/media/newsrel...eing20309.html
2. Korn, Marc. (2011, December 8). Self-discipline: The art of continuous learning. Accessed March 6, 2012, marckornblog.com/discipline-o...uous-learning/
3. Parelli Natural Horse Training website. Accessed May 18, 2012, www.parellinaturalhorsetraini...-horsemanship/
4. US Fish and Wildlife homepage. Accessed March 6, 2012, www.fws.gov/help/about_us.html
5. US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Conservation Training Center website. Accessed March 6, 2012, <http://nctc.fws.gov/led/competencymo...llearning.html>

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