Reading Books Won't Future-Proof You. Here's What Will.

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Just last year I was attending an author conference, listening to a panel of senior executives talking about learning. The moderator asked:

"What's your favorite way to learn new things?"

They all said some version of "reading about them." One guy said, "I listen to audiobooks on my commute." Another said, "I keep up with my industry's trades." Two others mentioned their favorite new business book.

And I sat there and thought to myself, *Sorry, folks, but if that's what you think learning is, you're in big trouble.* Which may seem like a strange sentiment coming from an author of business books.

So let me make myself clear. Most of us believe that learning is acquiring new information. As we spend many, many years in school doing just that, we get used to thinking of learning as putting a bunch of facts in our brain and then regurgitating them back out in tests and essays.

Fortunately, some schools and teachers are shifting, starting to operate on the assumption that this acquisition of facts is only the first step in learning. My daughter teaches seventh and eighth grade in a small independent progressive school. This weekend, she was showing me some papers her students had written. As I was reading through them, I noticed the wide range of skills they demonstrated. Some of the kids were just rehashing the facts they'd taken in. Others, though, were clearly sorting through what they had read, looking for what was most germane to the assignment, then presenting their conclusions in a logical and compelling way. They weren't just recycling facts, they were learning: how to reflect on the assignment as they read through the materials, see patterns in what they were reading, select the most important facts based on those patterns, and use language clearly to make relevant points.

In other words, learning isn't just about taking in information—it's about what you do with that information. Do you use it to see the world in new ways, to come to new conclusions, to behave differently? If not, I propose to you that you're not really learning.

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So when I heard those executives saying that their favorite way to learn was to read, I was skeptical about whether or not they were really learning much. I know way too many senior people who think they're great leaders because they read lots of leadership books, or who think they're staying abreast of the changes in their industry because they're reading about those changes. [It's akin to thinking you're active in politics because you read the news.]

Real learning is almost always at least somewhat uncomfortable. It's challenging. It's figuring out how to operate in new ways, questioning your assumptions, putting new ideas into practice. Real learning takes you out of the tried-and-true, and into that murky, disturbing land of I'm-not-very-good-at-this.

And, I submit to you, *that* kind of learning is central to our success today. In fact, I'd propose that being able to learn new *skills* (vs. new facts) quickly and continuously is the key capability of the 21st century.

Think about it. Nearly everything is changing faster now that at any point in history. It took almost 50 years, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, for the telephone to move from 5% to 50% penetration among U.S. households. Smartphones achieved that same 5% to 50% market penetration in just 5 years.

And the pace of change is accelerating in every part of life: business models changing; consumer behavior evolving; organizations merging, dividing, restructuring. Social media and streaming video are re-inventing the ways we communicate and build relationships. Technology is curing disease, extending our lives, and—sadly—unbalancing the planet.

The kind of relaxed, armchair learning—reading a few books, discussing some new ideas—that might have served us well enough 30 years ago is woefully inadequate today. In the words of Ari de Geus, for many years the head of planning and strategy at Royal Dutch Shell, "the ability to learn faster than your competitors may be the only sustainable competitive advantage."

I agree.

So, how can we possibly keep up? If the kind of learning that's required today isn't just reading a book, or surfing the Internet, what is it, and how can we do it?

The answer: become a master of mastery, the kind of learner who can quickly acquire new knowledge and put it to use, who can learn and apply new skills and new ways of operating, and let go of the old ways when they no longer serve.

As my colleagues and I have been coaching and teaching leaders in a wide variety of organizations over the past 25 years, we've noticed that some people are great at this kind of learning. They're willing and able to step out of their comfort zone in order to learn—really learn—so they can keep up with the pace of change.

Based on our work, and our reflection on our own successes and failures in learning, we've identified four simple, powerful mental skills you can use to navigate in this must-learn world. **We call these skills ANEW: Aspiration, Neutral Self-awareness, Endless Curiosity, and Willingness to Be Bad First.**

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Aspiration

Most people believe that you either want to do something or you don't; you're ambitious or you're not; you're motivated or you lack motivation. But people who are great learners know that's not true: they realize that you can *make* yourself want to learn things—*you can increase your own level of aspiration.* This is key, because we quite often don't want to learn things that are important for us to learn. Think about the last time your company adopted a new approach: restructured your part of the business, required everyone to report their results in a new way, or overhauled the process for getting products to market. Were you thrilled and eager to find out about it and learn how to do it? Doubtful.

Your initial response was probably to think of all the reasons it would be difficult, and a list of justifications for not learning it (*it will take too long, it's probably just a flash in the pan, if I wait it out we'll go back to the old way,* etc. etc.). That's what happens when we don't want to learn something new: we focus on all the things that would be hard about doing it. We unconsciously reinforce our lack of aspiration.

On the other hand, when we do want to learn something, we focus on the benefits to us—what we'll gain from learning it—and we envision a happy future where we're reaping those benefits.

You can use this basic human tendency as a powerful way to increase your aspiration, especially in an area where you know you need to learn but don't want to: consciously shift your focus from the difficulties of learning it to the benefits.

A few years ago, I was coaching a CMO who was resisting learning about the use of "big data" as a tool in marketing. He had convinced himself that he didn't have time to get into it, that it wasn't that important to his success. Even though most of his peers were starting to rely more on data-driven metrics, he was still sticking to all his reasons about why it wasn't necessary.

Finally I realized that this was purely an aspiration problem. I encouraged him to think of ways that getting up-to-speed on the use of big data could benefit him personally. At first he was stumped, but eventually he came up with two things that were meaningful to him. He acknowledged that finding out more about how the company's customers were responding to his team's online advertising efforts would be very helpful to him. He also admitted that he'd love to know how their in-store marketing campaigns were affecting per-customer sales in different markets.

Then I invited him to imagine that future. "Let's say it's a year from now, you're using data analytics, and you're getting those benefits. What would that look like?"

He started to get a little excited. “We would be testing a variety of different approaches simultaneously,” he responded, “and we’d have real information about which ones were working, and for which segments of our customer base.” He looked thoughtful. “We could save a lot of time and money—stop doing the less effective approaches more quickly or tweak things to make them work better,” he added. I could tell he was actually seeing that future in his mind. And I could almost feel his aspiration ramping up.

Within a few months, he had hired a very skilled and knowledgeable data analytics person, and he was learning from her on a daily basis and starting to apply his learning, with her help, to their key marketing campaigns.

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Neutral Self-Awareness

It's very hard to know how to get somewhere if you don't know where you are now. If you want to go to New York, for instance, and you think you're in Philadelphia, but you're actually in London… well, that ocean is going to be a big shock.

If you think you're already good at something and you aren't, it will be almost impossible to get better. David Dunning, a psychologist at Cornell who writes about self-deception, has compiled some very poignant data about our inaccuracy in assessing our current capabilities. For example, in one study he found that 94 percent of college professors believe they are doing "above average work." Clearly, many of them are wrong… and many of them are extremely wrong. And I suspect that all 94 percent, given their beliefs about themselves, would resist the idea they might have a lot to learn about being effective teachers.

Great learners are neutrally self-aware. They're accurate in their assessment of their current strengths and weaknesses, and that allows them to step into learning at just the right point. One of my favorite examples of this kind of self-awareness is a world-class learner named Michelangelo. When Pope Julius II asked Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he responded by saying that he wasn't really a painter (he saw himself as being primarily a

sculptor), and that he didn't have any experience in fresco. The Pope insisted, so Michelangelo surrounded himself with assistants who were experienced frescoists—and he let them know he had a lot to learn. In fact, one biographer records that he often called out to his assistants, especially early in the project, "I am no artist—come up and help me." Because Michelangelo was willing to acknowledge where he was starting from, he learned quickly, and by the time the ceiling was completed he was widely acknowledged as one of Italy's great frescoists.

The best place to start, in order to become more neutrally self-aware, is inside your own head: to notice how you're talking to yourself about yourself, and then question that "self-talk." We tend to believe what we tell ourselves about ourselves (remember those 9.4 out of 10 college professors), and sometimes that can really lead us astray.

Let's say, for example that your boss has told you that your team isn't strong enough, and that you need to get better at assessing and developing talent. Your initial mental response might be something like, *What? That's just wrong. My team is awesome. I have a great eye for talent.*

As soon as you recognize what you're thinking, ask yourself, *Is that accurate?* That's a simple way to question the validity of your self-assessment. You may then start to wonder, *Is my team awesome? Do I have a great eye for talent?*

At that point, ask yourself, *What facts do I have to support this?* When you start to reflect on yourself in this more objective way, you may discover that the facts actually support what your boss has told you: you're having to fill in for your people's lack of capability by doing things yourself, or you've hired some people in the past year who haven't succeeded, or your peers are complaining to you about the under-performance of one of your key players.

We call this becoming a "fair witness" of yourself: focusing on being objective and accurate in your self-assessment, rather than just believing whatever your inner voice tells you. It's a powerful way to recognize where you are now so you can be open to seeing where you need to go.

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Endless Curiosity

Anyone who has spent time with little kids has seen endless curiosity in action. Kids have an unquenchable urge to understand and master their environment. It's how each of us evolves from a cute blob at birth to a pretty fully-fledged human being by the time we go to school. In his book *Brain Rules*, John Medina says of curiosity in babies and small children, "This need for explanation is so powerfully stitched into their experience that some scientists describe it as a drive, just as hunger and thirst and sex are drives."

Think of curiosity, this inborn drive, as jet fuel for real learning. It's the urge that makes us try something until we can do it, or think about something until we understand how it works.

Sadly, by the time we're adolescents, this drive to understand and master gets largely socialized out of us. We go from, " "How does that work, mommy?" and "Why does that happen?" to "That's dumb" and "I already knew that." It becomes not cool to be curious.

Great learners retain their childhood curiosity. We've found a practical approach to re-igniting your own curiosity, and—as with neutral self-awareness—it starts with how you're talking to yourself. First you find a place in your life where you're still curious, and notice how you talk

to yourself about it. Then you transfer that "curious self-talk" into those areas where you're not yet curious, but want to be.

A few years ago, I coached a brilliant corporate lawyer who had been offered a bigger job within her company, but it required that she learn about employment law. She knew it was necessary learning if she wanted the job, but she wasn't at all curious about it. In fact, she told me she thought employment law was incredibly boring and that she wasn't interested in it at all.

When I asked her what she was curious about, she answered without a moment's hesitation. "Swing dancing," she replied.

"OK, " I said, "When you're thinking about swing dancing, what do you focus on?"

Again, no hesitation: "I'm really fascinated about the history of it, for one thing," she said. "I wonder how it developed, and whether it was a response to the depression—it's such a happy art form. And I'm always asking about how to improve. I take classes, and pepper my teacher with questions. I'll practice a step over and over till I get it right."

I pointed out to her that she was asking a lot of what we call "curious questions" about swing dancing—questions that start with "How…?" or "Why…?" or "I wonder…?" Then I encouraged her to think about similar questions she could be asking about employment law.

She thought for a minute, and then she laughed. “How about, ‘I wonder how anyone could possibly think this is interesting?’” I laughed, too. “That’s actually an OK place to start,” I said. “How *could* somebody find it interesting?”

“Huh,” she said. “I hadn’t thought of that. Why would somebody go into employment law? Maybe some lawyers see it as a way to protect both their employees and their companies. Or maybe they…”

And within a fairly short period, she got curious enough about the topic to begin asking questions of people who had the answers she needed. And as she explored, she discovered (to her surprise) that it was actually somewhat interesting to her, and she became well-versed enough in employment law to succeed in that part of her new, bigger job.

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Willingness to Be Bad First

As I noted earlier, once we get good at some things, we don't like having to go back to being *not* good at other things—especially in public, and most especially at work. When we've risen to a fairly senior level in our profession, and suddenly a new technology or methodology or operating model comes along, and we have to return to that awkward, clumsy, embarrassing state we call "beginner"… we pretty much hate that.

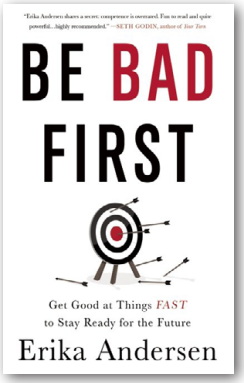
Great learners get comfortable in that beginner state. And they do it—yet again—through managing their self-talk. Generally, when we're trying to do something new and we're bad at it, our self-talk goes something like this: *I hate this. I'm such an idiot. I'll never get this right. This is so frustrating!* And that self-talk, as you might imagine, is like static in our brains that leaves us almost no bandwidth for learning.

It turns out that the ideal mindset for being in the beginner state consists of two complementary pieces of self-talk. First: *I'm going to be bad at this to start with, because I've never done it before.* And then: *I know I can learn to do this over time.* We call this "balancing acceptance of not-good with belief in your ability to get good."

Over the past few years, I've seen a wonderful example of the power of this mindset in a new CEO I've been coaching. She came into the job with ideal self-talk: *I've never been a CEO before, so I won't be fantastic to start with. And I'm a fast learner, with a lot of the necessary skills, so I think I can get good at this pretty quickly.* I watched her start the job relaxed, open, willing to ask the right (beginner) questions, and never faking knowledge or skill she didn't have. Her learning curve was amazingly fast, and within a few months her people and her board were praising both her approach and her results. She is quickly becoming one of the more effective business leaders I know, at least partly because she was willing to accept the necessity of being bad first.

The ability to acquire new skills and knowledge quickly and continuously is key to success in today's high-change world. **By learning and using these ANEW skills, you can become the kind of master learner who embraces change, and stays ready to meet the future.**

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Erika Andersen is the founding partner of Proteus, a coaching, consulting, and training firm that focuses on leader readiness. Over the past 30 years, Erika has developed a reputation for creating approaches to learning and business building that are custom tailored to her clients' challenges, goals, and culture. She and her colleagues at Proteus focus uniquely on supporting leaders at all levels to get ready and stay ready to meet whatever the future might bring.

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