

The Profile of a Successful Learner: Updated March 2021

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- 01 Learns from Unfamiliar Events**
Learns how to interpret events, meanings, and impacts, minimizing biases to broaden perspective.
- 02 Learns from Experience**
Plans for high-impact experiences that promote growth. Gains deep insights from experiences and leverages them in future challenges.
- 03 Self-Aware**
Understands one's strengths, limitations and *potential*, and how one is perceived by others.
- 04 Ready to Learn**
Is confident, able, motivated and prepared to integrate new knowledge and experiences into behaviors required for success.
- 05 Develops Continuously**
Maintains a current development plan and knows how to learn in the flow of everyday work, including meetings, conversations and network activities.
- 06 Practices with Intention**
Engages in deliberate practice to build mastery and asks for help when needed.
- 07 Shares Learning Freely**
Develops and shares a "teachable point of view" of success and shares learning with others freely to facilitate organizational learning.

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Introduction

I first created this earlier in 2021 and then decided two things were missing: a picture that better reflects that successful learners come from all demographics, and a competency to learn from unfamiliar events.

Learning from unfamiliar events is certainly not prediction, or a peek into what events are going to do in the future, as much as it is how interpretations are formed, handled, incorporated over time, and turned into action. The default is to rely on experience, and while learning from experience is a wonderful thing, it has two problems:

- Experience can turn into a bias when you are unaware of how it is helping or hindering a new way of seeing things, or it causes you to jump to conclusions too soon.
- Humans are imperfect in their recollections of experiences over time, and their ability to accurately apply important pieces of experience to a new event fades over time.

We want to keep experience as a key driver of learning because it has such an impact on day-to-day activities, and we want to "transcend and include it" as a core competency. This means we don't want to be limited by it, and we don't want to miss or ignore the value that experience plays. Let's keep minimizing duality; it is not either/or; it is both/and.

This profile is a key part of my executive coaching work, and how I help my clients develop their learning to learn competence.

Why a Success Profile for Learning?

It's common today to see a multitude of profiles of successful people and successful leaders. Profiles set a great standard and set of characteristics, skills and abilities for us all to aspire to for career growth. When I went looking for one related to learning, I didn't find one that captured what I think it means to be a successful learner. So I created my own. Why does this matter?

Because disruption is a much bigger game now, and re-skilling is a skill everyone needs to focus on.

Complex problems, and the overall way the business game has shifted don't lend themselves to traditional problem-solving techniques, recipes, best practices or rules. They are best addressed with novel approaches based on the principles of emergence, attraction, self-organization, and interconnections, to name just a few. This requires a complexity mindset, one of flexibility, experimentation, a willingness to be wrong, openness, and an ability to listen to learn rather than listen to inform. It also requires an ability to learn with others to create experiments that turn the tide on a challenge, so managing all the biases that start the "I know the answer" reflex to find a quick fix need curtailing. All of these require learning attributes and a competency in learning how to learn.

According to Cy Wakeman, an "eliminate drama in the workplace" coach and therapist, the highest form of self-care is to continually keep yourself relevant to your job, your business and your industry. This too requires more than a basic competence in learning. While each person in an organization is responsible for their own personal relevance, organizations can do more to create the culture and conditions that support "relevance as a learning objective." Leaders are not responsible for their teams' relevance; their teams are. Leaders are responsible to maintain their own relevance to the work. I love Cy's take on the shared responsibility for learning, and notion that we owe it to ourselves to learn.

Finally, complex problems wait for no one. Their demands don't wait for training departments to lead the way, or HR processes to adapt new technologies, or communities of practice to form in time to address them. They do what they do; they behave, they create unanticipated results, and they change the dynamics of themselves again and again. It is up to us to develop the mindset and capacity to spot the patterns and highest leverage points for action to gain traction in the midst of chaos.

Profile Distinctions

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Learning from Experience – using everyday experiences and helping others use their own to grow skills. Experiences include:

- Projects
- Temporary assignments
- Talent sharing across the organization
- Job shadowing
- Experiments
- Failure
- Getting out of the comfort zone

Leaders need to learn how to structure experiences to boost results, growth and skills for the future, and coach others to get comfortable with the uncomfortable aspects of being a "beginner."

Self-awareness – understanding:

- Your strengths, how they are used, overused, and underused, and how to apply them situationally. Strengths that are overdone can be just as detrimental as weaknesses.
- How to grow not just performance but potential and readiness for future roles or tasks.
- Your reputation, the perceptions others have that define success over and above your own self-perception and how to incorporate it into the learning process.

Ready to Learn – readiness to learn is often overlooked in the learning process. Billions are wasted every year because individuals aren't ready to learn and the organization's structure isn't ready to provide support in coaching, mentoring, deliberate practice, experimentation, and the developmental spiral (one step forward, two steps back, repeat until the new skill is achieved). Readiness has to do with:

- An individual's motivation
- An identity prepared to learn new things
- Readiness to change behavior
- The confidence to learn/change

All of these factors are individualized, which is why traditional group training has left so much to be desired.

Develops Continuously – this is learning the skills to:

- Reflect (extracting learning to take to the next task), alone and with others
- Approach daily tasks with a learning mindset
- Learn from regular meetings and daily conversations
- Work from a daily development plan (I like to call these "Intention Plans")
- Be willing to demonstrate new learning publicly
- Learn how to learn in the process of trying to accomplish a task
- Learn in the flow of work, which is intentional learning while accomplishing a task
- Make mistakes without judgment to stay on the personal "learning edge" and outside of the comfort zone

Practices with intention – intentional learning is quite different from learning in the past. It is active engagement, which means:

- Being fully present in the moment and dealing with distractions
- Focusing specifically on weaker areas
- Learning in sprints
- Knowing how and when to practice a new skill
- Knowing how to ask for developmental feedback and act on it
- Knowing how to find the right opportunities to practice

Practicing with intention is a method in and of itself.

Shares leaning freely – this is knowing how to share learning and teach others in a way that helps others learn. It:

- Is more than the transmission of information.
- Is teaching a point of view on a subject that connects to business strategy, customer or supplier chains, productivity, innovation, or other critical business elements.
- Relates success drivers of that learning, including others involved.
- Incorporates knowledge of adult learning principles and storytelling skills.
- Asks challenging questions to facilitate learning.
- Asks reflection questions to enhance learning.
- Answers audience questions.

People that work with me learn more about how to build a team of successful learners. I use this framework to help leaders build a learning culture by incorporating all of these key elements into their processes. In so doing, they get more "bang" for their learning "buck."