

10 Steps to Improve Your Learning

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Introduction

Throughout our lives all of us learn both consciously and unconsciously. It is through learning that we acquire our sense of ourselves (our personal identity) and it is through learning that we acquire the skills and competencies that get us through life. Some of this learning is formal and frequently delivered through classroom with teachers resulting in qualifications but this, although important, is only a small part of the learning that leads to a fulfilled and satisfying life.

Are you in charge of your learning?

Most learning is under your control and you are not dependent on teachers or qualifications to achieve high levels of personal performance and achievement.

For example you can be taught about leadership, but that will not make you an effective leader. Other kinds of learning are required that are not easily brought about in a traditional classroom with a teacher and a dependent group of students. At the very least, learning to lead requires experience of particular kinds including the opportunity to take risks and make mistakes and also to reflect and learn from experience.

We can learn to improve the way we learn in order to improve our performance in any sphere that can take us

- From absolute beginner to intermediate
- From intermediate to advanced
- From advanced to mastery
- From mastery to who knows where!

If we have insights into the different kinds of learning required and the tactics needed to achieve desired outcomes at different levels of performance we can take charge of our own learning. Underlying this notion is the recognition that we can all improve our general learning skills. In some ways the ability to improve our ability to learn is perhaps the most important and powerful learning of all.

The 10 Steps to Improve Your Learning.

1. Be clear about what it is you want to learn
2. Be clear about why you want to learn
3. Envision the end-point
4. Create learning targets
5. Understand how you best learn and the types of learning needed
6. Explore learning tactics, tools, and techniques
7. Create a Personal Learning Contract
8. Get going
9. Keep going
10. Celebrate success

Symbols used

This and the related modules use a number of symbols to help you navigate and know what you have to do.



Think about these questions. They are designed to help you capture what you really think. Often you will be asked to select three things from a list, or type in what you think.



This is an activity you can do on-line. Alternatively, you can print out the module and do it later.



This is an activity you undertake off-line.



This activity is even better when you can do it with friends, colleagues or your family.



This symbol reminds you where you are in the 10 steps. It should always be present on your screen showing the number.



Be clear about what it is you want to learn



Vagueness and fuzziness about what it is you want to learn will decrease your chances of achieving specific learning goals, unless it happens by chance over an unspecified period of time and recognised with hindsight. But we are not talking about that kind of learning. When learning is conscious and planned there is a much better chance of improving performance.

Hoping to improve your wine appreciation on the basis of ad hoc and somewhat random activity will possibly produce a result but there is a quicker more focused option.

Look at the difference between these sets of statements

I would like to improve my wine appreciation	I would like to be able to distinguish between the ten dominant grape varieties within 4 weeks
I wish I could organise myself better	I would like to reduce the 2-3 hours a week the time I spend searching for things I have misplaced to zero
I want to be a better manager	I would like to acquire a more motivational leadership style within three months and see my team respond by performing better
I want to be more strategic	I would like to routinely appraise myself of global and industry-wide developments and consider options

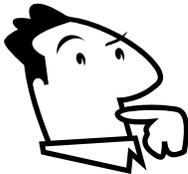
By comparison with the left hand, the hand column goals show

- Greater precision about the objective
- Recognition of current levels of performance
- A view of the gap to be filled through improved learning
- The likely timescale



Re-write these aspirations into from/to statements. Try and make it reasonably precise and realistic.

FROM	TO
I want to improve the way I think	
[Possible answers, to give you an idea]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve my ability to evaluate the logic of written arguments • Interpret numerically presented information • Think creatively and think outside the box • Solve problems using more imagination



You need to start with as clear a picture of what you are trying to learn as possible. Wherever possible you need to start with a definition. For example, Strategic Thinking can be defined as

Strategic thinking is the ability to routinely take the longer-term view and see the bigger picture, leading to examination of options, before deciding on action to be taken.

You may feel that this is something that you do not do routinely or that you do it within boundaries that are too small. Similarly you may feel that you think strategically within your function but that you do not do so organisationally.

Greater precision can be achieved by the use of **behavioural indicators**. These are often available within your company but if not it can help to try creating your own because this helps deepen your understanding of what it is you are trying to learn. Some behavioural indicators for Strategic Thinking are shown below:

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thinks routinely about the bigger picture • Thinks beyond immediate needs • Looks at issues from different perspectives • Actively considers alternatives • Looks to the longer term and how things will or might change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looks for short term solutions that meet present needs • Considers immediate impact only • Agues the same case even when circumstances have change • Does not consider viewpoints or experience of others
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You will see that Indictors are either positive or negative. Positive indicators show the presence of the ability in question whereas negative indicators show the absence. Clearly there are shades of grey but the combined effect of the two lists is to give a very clear idea of what is meant by strategic thinking.



A **behavioural indicator** is a short statement of behaviour that is

- Clear and unambiguous
- Observable
- Relevant to the ability in question

Which indicators below meet the criteria above?

Honesty is indicated Positively by	Negatively by
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling both good and bad news • Tries to tell the whole story • Accepts responsibility for mistakes • Honourable behaviour • Decency • Trustworthiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Telling lies routinely • Withholding key information • Blaming others for own mistakes • Unreliability • Critical attitude • Evasiveness

The first three items in each list are reasonably clear descriptions of relevant behaviour. The next three items in each list fail the test because they are not clear and unambiguous or even relevant.



Try writing some indicators for Effective Relationships

Effective relationships	
Uses skill and sensitivity in dealing with people in a wide range of informal and formal situations	
Positive indicators	Negative indicators
Here are some more examples:	Here are some more examples:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage others to come forward with their views • Adapts behaviour to suit the situation • Ensures regular contact is made with different levels of staff and customers • Sells rather than tells • Explains decisions • Actively listens to others before deciding • Puts people at ease 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imposes own ideas on others • Creates or tolerates barriers that discourage open discussion • Disagrees harshly • Uses status difference to control discussions • Interrupts others abruptly and frequently • Remains aloof and unapproachable • Intimidates others

Later in this module you will turn the overall improvement goal into precise learning goals. You have now completed the first critical step to improving your learning, but the next step is equally important.



2 Be clear about why you want to learn

You are clearer now about what it is you want to improve, but it is equally important to recognise why you want to improve.



Many people want to improve so that they feel better about themselves. Interestingly other relevant factors such as more money are not always so important but in some cases are the prime motivator. On balance which three factors do you think drive you most?

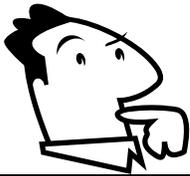
My three Main Drivers

- Increased confidence
- Greater self esteem
- Admiration/respect from others
- Overcoming fears and concerns
- Sense of achievement
- Overcoming frustration
- Fulfilment
- Qualifications
- Recognition by others
- Better job
- Better prospects
- More money

If you feel other drivers are important to you put them here

3 Envision the end-point

This is a key stage that is often missed. Not envisioning the end-point can deprive you of early pleasure of clear progress and it can also undermine or weaken your motivation when the going gets tough.



Imagine you have succeeded in your overall aim. First of all write down the aim.

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Picture yourself performing at the desired level and think about these questions

- Where will this be?
- Who will be involved?
- Exactly what will you be doing, what will you be saying?
- What will others be doing and saying?
- How will you feel?



If it is enough to merely imagine the end-point, that's fine. If you can write it down then do so.

Where and when?	
Who else is involved?	
What are you doing/saying?	
What are others doing/saying?	

How will you feel?	
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One effect of envisioning the end point in as much practical detail as possible is that it helps to energise you, to get going and keep going, and to maintain effort especially in the face of set-backs and difficulties.

Print this out and keep it where you will see it regularly. Add images and graphics. Personalise it.

Another more concrete way to envision the end-point is to make your shield of change.



Design your own shield of change

The exercise is designed to help you to think about where you are starting out, where you are coming from, where you are now, and where you are aiming to be.

Create a shield on a large piece of paper or using a programme such as PowerPoint on your computer. Try and be creative and feel free to use as wide a range of imagery as possible. Cut images out of magazines and paste them together or use clip-art on your computer.

The shield has 6 aspects

1. (Above the shield) a picture or drawing: if you were seen as an animal, what animal would it be right now?
2. (Top left quadrant of the shield) where are you coming from? (The past)
3. (Top right quadrant) where are you now? (The present)
4. (Bottom left quadrant) where are you going? (The future)
5. (Bottom right quadrant) If you could have your wildest dreams come true what would they be? (The fantasy)
6. (Below the shield) A motto reflecting what the shield stands for to encourage you!



Show your shield to people whom you trust. See what they think. It is even more fun and more creative to create the shield with others, or even a range of shields each reflecting the different learning goals of the people in the group.

The combined effect of steps 1 to 3 is MOTIVATIONAL. The next steps are about getting on with it.



4 Create learning targets

Now the time has come to set formal learning targets. Learning targets are derived from the overall aim and

- Create greater precision
- Give you a sense of being in control and managing the process
- Help you monitor your own progress
- Give you the satisfaction of seeing progress
- Help you know when you have arrived



First you need to define your current level of performance

In your own words describe your current level of performance

What aspects of your performance would you like to improve?



Show your description to others whom you trust. See if they agree and add to or refine your assessment of yourself.

How would you describe your current level?

1. Absolute beginner (no real experience)
2. Beginner (some experience)
3. Intermediate (experienced but performance is unsatisfying)
4. Advanced (on the whole competent but a few areas need improving)
5. Mastery (able to teach others but still learning)

What level do you want to progress to? Initially it should be the next one up.



Think of some of the the things that will help indicate that you have achieved your goals

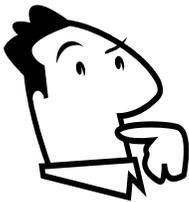
	Examples
Things I will know	
Things I can say or do	
How I will feel	
Qualifications achieved	
Indicators of progress	

This self-assessment is subjective but it helps you be realistic and not try too much at one go.

5 Understand how you best learn and the types of learning you need

Learning styles

In order to learn effectively we need to pass several times through a learning cycle though not always in the same sequence.



- We need to have some form of experience
- We need to reflect on or think about that experience
- We need to draw lessons and insights from the experience
- We need to plan to gain new experiences in the light of experience

All stages of the cycle are critical to learning but some of us feel more comfortable at some of the stages rather than the others. Either we go straight there or get stuck because it is a comfort zone for us. This is sometimes referred to as our preferred learning style. We need all four but often get stuck in one or two modes.

Most of us have strong preferences for one or more of four styles of learning. From your knowledge of yourself, do you know which your preferred modes are?

Learning Styles (Honey & Mumford)	Choose One
Activists learn best from relatively short here and now tasks. These may be managerial activities on the job or on courses: such things as business games and competitive teamwork exercises. They learn less well from situations involving a passive role such as listening to lectures or reading.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This is me• Not really sure• No idea
Reflectors learn best from activities where they are able to stand back, listen, and observe. They like	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• This is me• Not really sure

collecting information and being the opportunity to think about it. They learn less well when they are rushed into things without the opportunity to plan.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No idea
Theorists learn best when they can review things in terms of a system, a concept, a model, or theory. They are interested in and absorb ideas even when they are distant from current reality. They learn less well from activities presented without this kind of implicit or explicit design.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is me • Not really sure • No idea
Pragmatists learn best where there is an obvious link between the subject matter and the problem or opportunity on the job. They like being exposed to techniques or processes that can be applied in their immediate circumstances. They learn less well from learning events that seem distant from their own reality: 'Does it apply to my own situation?'	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is me • Not really sure • No idea

If you have a strong preference for one or more of these modes that will indicate how you are likely to begin but it is important not to get stuck in one mode at the expense of the others.



If you are not sure about your preferred style Complete the Learning Styles Questionnaire. (See Peter Honey Learning)

Different types of learning



The other thing to bear in mind is that there are, broadly speaking, four kinds of learning. Below is an example of how different kinds of learning are involved in learning to improve your wine appreciation. Competence levels are also critical.

Skills requiring practice and feedback to get right	
Beginner to Intermediate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noticing and describing different tastes in wines • Describing aromas (so-called nose) • Describing different colours • Noticing and being able to identify different grape varieties • Being able to identify main wine types • Noticing the differences between young and mature wines, and being able to describe the differences
Advanced to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being able to identify specific wines

Mastery	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Being able to identify specific vintages
Feelings, attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A positive approach to everything to do with wine• Confidence to taste and speak in company• Confidence to get things wrong
Understanding and appreciation of theory or concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How the senses influence the experience of wine• How alcohol is created
Knowledge, information (usually a matter of memorising) or access to reference material	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How wine is made and the factors influencing wine characteristics• Characteristics of wine regions, etc• Chemistry of wine• History of wine

It is by understanding that different kinds of learning are involved that appropriate tools, tactics, and techniques can be consciously adopted to maximise the efficiency of your learning.



6 Explore learning tactics, tools, and techniques



You now need to consider the vast array of ways to improve your learning. This is where many people go astray when they are trying to learn new things. Once you understand the different kinds of learning involved, you need to explore the many different ways in which the desired learning can be achieved.

Look at the list the below. The list below is a generic list and is not exhaustive, but it does illustrate the vast array of learning opportunities that exist or can be created by you the learner.

When planning to learn a skill or competence you need choose according to

- Your preferred learning styles
- Feasibility
- Time available

- Cost implications
- Accessibility

Formally structured methods usually created by a third party over which you have **relatively little control or influence**

- Lectures
- Demonstrations
- Multi-media in general
- Most e-learning
- Satellite delivered programmes
- CBT (computer-based training) programmes
- TV programmes and courses
- Video
- Courses in general, especially with a set syllabus
- Distance learning
- Manuals
- Books

Formally structured methods usually created by a third party over which you have some control or influence because they are **more interactive**

- Workshops
- Seminars
- Interactive video
- Participative exercises
- Doing projects
- Syndicate work
- Scenario-planning
- Programmed instruction
- Role-playing
- Dramatic re-enactment
- Reading and discussing case studies

More informal methods, usually a third party involved, but **you have much more control**

- Seeking explanations
- Describing

- Arranging visits
- Forming alliances and partnerships
- Joining or creating networks
- Discussing
- Questioning
- Coaching
- Mentoring
- Memorising
- Brainstorming
- Shadowing
- Observing
- Getting involved
- Reviewing and reflecting
- Mental rehearsal
- Modelling
- Surveying
- Researching
- Internet searching
- Asking
- Writing your own case study
- Writing scenarios and critical incidents
- Summarising
- Presenting
- Dialoguing
- Exploring
- Testing
- Experimenting
- Hypothesising
- Imaging
- Imagining

In addition there are some **useful aids to learning**

- Learning logs
- Learning contracts
- Personal development plans
- Checklists



We learn all the time but do not always recognise it. To really power up your learning skills you need to make conscious choices

about how you will learn, even though not all that you learn can be predicted in advance.

Wanting to is critical but so is choosing the best tools, tactics and techniques. Remember the three learning Ts - Tools, Tactics, and Technique. They make all the difference to achieving your learning goals.

7 Create a Personal Learning Contract

Your personal learning contract is a statement of commitment to yourself and is also a means to monitoring progress.



The contract can be as detailed and as structured as you see fit (this varies greatly from person to person) but it should at least contain statements of

What you want to achieve overall (however you wish to express this)
Why (your motives)
The level you are starting out at (as precisely as possible)
The level you wish to achieve (as precisely as possible)
The specific actions you are going to take including the tools, tactics and

techniques you are going to use	
This week	
Next week	
By the end of month one	
Month two	
Month three	
Month six	
Beyond six months	
Monitoring Progress	
How you will know you are making progress?	
Success!	
What will indicate that you have succeeded?	

Keep a record and look at it from time to time. If you can involve others in your commitment you will increase your chances of success.

8 Get going



If you have got this far you are already going, but the critical thing is to take action that enables you to feel you are actually improving. There are several ways to do this.

- Meet up with a friend or colleague whom you have not seen in the interim and describe or demonstrate what you have done in the interim.
- Refer to your progress indicators and tick them off as you make progress.
- Aim for early success. It reduces the risk of giving up early on.
- Remind yourself of the expected benefits and potential rewards. Look back at your envisioning exercise or your Change Shield.

Some forms of learning are acknowledged through accreditation and certificates, but vast amounts of personal learning and growth are not recognised in this way. Much of the most important learning (tolerance and understanding, effective parenting, leadership, teamwork) is not recognised in this way.

9 Keep going



Getting going is hard enough, but to keep going is often harder still.

- Refer to your progress indicators and tick them off as you make progress.
- Recognise that guilt and anxiety about progress is inevitable
- Re-adjust goals and timescales to be more realistic in the light of experience.
- List early warning signs that may block you progress and think about responses that would help

Danger signs	Remedies



Meet up with a friend or colleague whom you have not seen for a while and describe or demonstrate what you have done in the interim.

Identify your **personal reinforcers** that will help you to keep going regardless of

- Set-backs
- Disappointments
- Frustrations
- Unexpected problems
- Pressures from other sources

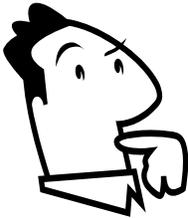
Reinforcers are REWARDS you can give yourself (treats) that you would not otherwise have had but for the progress you have made. They include a meal out, chocolates, an outing, champagne, a weekend away, etc etc or whatever takes your fancy.

Equally reinforcers can be PUNISHMENT that you inflict on yourself for lack of progress that you had committed to. This can be denial of the promised treats or something stronger like paying out to a charity. On balance rewards work better than punishments.

What support do I need and what can I put in place?

My **personal reinforcers** are

10 Celebrate SUCCESS



Finally don't forget to mark the achievement of having moved from one level of performance to another. It is always a satisfying feeling to know that you have done it, but there is also the intrinsic satisfaction of performing at a higher level than previously. Try to find ways of expressing the pleasure of the learning you have achieved.

If I achieve my overall goals my overall **REWARD** will be

Ultimately, the best way is simply to think and act in new ways and feel the benefit for you and for others, and then commit yourself to further learning.