

McKinsey Accelerate

The most fundamental skill: Intentional learning and the career advantage

Learning itself is a skill. Unlocking the mindsets and skills to develop it can boost personal and professional lives and deliver a competitive edge.

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The call for individuals and organizations

alike to invest in learning and development has never been more insistent. The World Economic Forum recently declared a reskilling emergency as the world faces more than one billion jobs transformed by technology. Even before COVID-19 emerged, the world of stable lifetime employment had faded in the rearview mirror, replaced by the expectation that both executives and employees must continually refresh their skills. The pandemic has only heightened the urgency of doubling down on skill building, either to keep up with the speed of transformation now underway or to manage the particulars of working in new ways.

Despite this context—and the nearly constant refrain for people to adapt to it by becoming lifelong learners—many companies struggle to meet their reskilling goals, and many individuals struggle to learn new and unfamiliar topics effectively. We believe that an underlying cause is the fact that so few adults have been trained in the core skills and mindsets of effective learners. Learning itself is a skill, and developing it is a critical driver of long-term career success. People who have mastered the mindsets and skills of effective learning can grow faster than their peers and gain more of the benefits from all the learning opportunities that come their way.

This article, supported by research and our decades of experience working as talent and learning professionals, explores the core mindsets and skills of effective learners. People who master these mindsets and skills become what we call intentional learners: possessors of what we believe might be the most fundamental skill for professionals to cultivate in the coming decades. In the process they will unlock tremendous value both for themselves and for those they manage in the organizations where they work.

Unlocking intentionality

Formal learning opportunities account for only a small percentage of the learning a professional needs over the course of a career. Everyday experiences and interactions offer tremendous learning opportunities, but only if you intentionally treat every moment as a learning opportunity. While intentional learners embrace their need to learn, for them learning is not a separate stream of work or an extra effort. Instead, it is an almost unconscious, reflexive form of behavior. Learning is the mode and mindset in which intentional learners operate all the time. Although they are experiencing all the same daily moments anyone else might, they get more out of those opportunities because everything—every experience, conversation, meeting, and deliverable—carries with it an opportunity to develop and grow.

Each of us can become an intentional learner. There are two critical mindsets (or things you need to believe) and five core practices (or behavior that collectively reorients you toward learning in everything you do). It's not as hard as it sounds; in fact, you're probably doing some of these already.

Foster learning by adjusting two critical mindsets

Mindsets are powerful, often exerting tremendous influence on behavior, sometimes unconsciously. When built on a foundation of self-efficacy—the belief that your actions can help you achieve desired outcomes¹—two mindsets serve as especially powerful fuel for intentional learners: a growth mindset and a curiosity mindset. While some people may have a natural proclivity to these mindsets, the important thing is that they are neither fixed nor immovable. In fact, part of their power is that they can be developed.

¹ Albert Bandura, "Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change," *Psychological Review*, 1977, Volume 84, Number 2, pp. 191–215.

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Adopt a growth mindset

Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck's popular work on growth suggests that people hold one of two sets of beliefs about their own abilities: either a fixed or a growth mindset. A fixed mindset is the belief that personality characteristics, talents, and abilities are finite or fixed resources; they can't be altered, changed, or improved. You simply are the way you are. People with this mindset tend to take a polar view of themselves—they consider themselves either intelligent or average, talented or untalented, a success or a failure. A fixed mindset stunts learning because it eliminates permission not to know something, to fail, or to struggle. Writes Dweck: "The fixed mindset doesn't allow people the luxury of becoming. They have to already be."²

In contrast, a growth mindset suggests that you can grow, expand, evolve, and change. Intelligence and capability are not fixed points but instead traits you cultivate. A growth mindset releases you from the expectation of being perfect. Failures and mistakes are not indicative of the limits of your intellect but rather tools that inform how you develop. A growth mindset is liberating, allowing you to find value, joy, and success in the process, regardless of the outcome.

Cultivating a growth mindset can begin with shifting your inner dialogue from beliefs about your ability (a fixed mindset) to beliefs about your opportunities and needs (a growth mindset)—for example, from

"I'm terrible at giving presentations" to "I need more practice presenting in front of others." Similarly, "I'm not good enough to be promoted to supervisor" might become "I need some additional experience before I'll be ready for promotion." Simple restatements have a dramatic impact on what you believe about your own abilities. A fixed mindset often runs deep; it may take constant practice to reframe your default thoughts.

Feed your curiosity

Curiosity, the engine of intentional learning, can be cultivated, even in those who don't consider themselves naturally curious. Think of curiosity as priming the pump. It's what gets your learning started. Curiosity is awareness, an openness to ideas, and an ability to make connections between disparate concepts.

The research tells us that curiosity matters for three primary reasons. First, inspiration is strongly correlated with an intrinsic desire to learn. Curiosity sparks inspiration. You learn more and more frequently because you are curious. Second, curiosity marks the beginning of a virtuous cycle that feeds your ability as a self-directed learner. Finally, research suggests that curiosity doesn't diminish with age, so it can serve you at any point in your career. Although your learning methods will change over time, curiosity will keep the spark of motivation alive.³

² Carol S. Dweck, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, New York: Random House, 2016, p. 25.

³ Albert Wiswell and Thomas G Reio Jr., "Field investigation of the relationship among adult curiosity, workplace learning, and job performance," *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, Volume 11, Number 1, Spring 2000.

Consider a few practices to strengthen your curiosity muscle:

- **Face your fears.** Fear is a significant barrier to curiosity; confronting those fears can be an important way to unlock learning skills. Spend a bit of time reflecting. What prevents you from asking questions in meetings? What keeps you from trying new things? What makes you reluctant to accept new assignments? Once you name what you are afraid of, you can decide how to address it.
- **Seek novel experiences and ideas.** New environments, new experiences, and exposure to new groups of people can all spark curiosity. Your search for the new can be as dramatic as moving to a new country or as simple as watching a documentary on a topic you don't know anything about. The key is to avoid stagnation by feeding your mind with something new.
- **Focus on what you love.** Your curiosity doesn't have to be confined to your career—cultivating the muscle in anything you do will serve all parts of your life. Consider collecting skills and interests outside your day job. Maybe you love podcasts, build engines, coach a sports team, or play an instrument in your spare time. Whatever you love to do, do more of it.

Whatever form curiosity takes, it helps you stay open and aware, broadens your perspective, and readies you to learn. Because it looks different in every person, the best advice is to just start. Get curious. Ask questions. Find something you are interested in and try it. When you become tired, try something else, but don't stop trying things.

Practice, practice, practice: The five core skills of intentional learners

A growth mindset and active curiosity are the fuel of intentional learning. But when you develop your learning muscles, it's also important to modulate these forces and direct their energy effectively. Five

best-practice behaviors help intentional learners get the most out of their experiences: setting goals, protecting time for learning, actively seeking feedback, conducting deliberate practice, and reflecting to evaluate yourself and determine your progress.

Set small, clear goals

Intentional learners are anchored in tangible goals, so they can use curiosity as an effective tool instead of a source of distraction. Learning-science scholars draw a bright line between a learner's goal and the ultimate "stickiness" of learning. Learning takes hold when you can retain and use what you have learned. The stickiest kind of learning happens when you are trying to accomplish something you care about.

Consider these best practices for goal setting:

- **Set a goal that matters to you.** Goals are a source of energy and motivation. Yours may be a career goal (for example, becoming a chief technology officer) or something more skill specific—say, improving your presentation skills. Either is fine if you really care about accomplishing that goal. You might also consider your goals through the lens of what is important to your organization: what of the emerging opportunities or challenges it faces excite you, and how you can shape a goal for yourself that allows you to embrace them (see sidebar "Creating a culture of intentional learning").
- **Make the goal concrete.** Be specific and explicit about what you will accomplish, but also take time to articulate why this goal matters to you. It can be fun to learn for learning's sake (what researchers call epistemic curiosity), but for many people this doesn't provide the same kind of anchor for learning as a goal directed at solving a problem or facing a challenge. "I'd like to learn more about technology," for example, won't give you the same kind of focused direction as "I'd like to be a great thought partner for digital experts and be able to solve problems with them."

Creating a culture of intentional learning

We've seen intentional learners blossom in organizations across all industries and firmly believe that any organization can build an intentional-learning culture. In every case, the leader played a critical role in fostering the culture that allowed learning to flourish. We advise leaders to embrace a few key practices:

1. Model and teach intentional-

learning practices. Leaders who value curiosity and learning have teams that value those things, too. To build an intentional-learning culture, you must visibly invest meaningful time in your own development, letting go of the idea of the leader as expert and embracing the idea of the leader as learner. As you learn, proactively teach the skills and mindsets of intentional learners.

2. Make high-quality learning and development planning part of your

culture and processes. Have a consistent planning cadence tied to your organization's strategic goals. Use formal learning as a companion to intentional-learning practices. Emphasize the need for intentional learning and create space for it in everyday practice. The spectrum of approaches can range from ensuring that employees get on-the-job mentoring to making time for coaching and feedback conversations to providing specific learning times that replace day-to-day work. Regardless of industry, intentional-learning cultures are built when leaders give voice to the importance of learning and ensure that employees have solid learning opportunities.

3. Beware of mixed messages.

Have you ever sent employees to training and then complained about the increased

workload their absence created? Or promoted the importance of curiosity while simultaneously imposing more top-down rules for how work should be done? While you might have thought you were valuing learning, you were actually signaling that it isn't as important as daily productivity and, perhaps, that you even begrudge people's desire to learn. Intentional-learning cultures thrive when the words of leaders match their actions.

4. Curate but don't spoon feed.

Help people set goals by asking them what they care about and how they want to grow. Give them ideas when they seem stuck or stagnant. Encourage and empower them to grow, providing opportunities and access to experts as needed, but don't remove the personal accountability all of us have for directing our own development.

- *Adopt a 'once in a career' mindset.* The Greek philosopher Heraclitus said no one "ever steps in the same river twice," for neither the river nor the person remains unchanged by the passage of time. Perhaps you weren't excited about helping your entire team to work remotely or optimizing all your customer-service processes for digital, but this also might be the only moment in your career when you have that opportunity. A once-in-a-career mindset that both enjoys and learns from every opportunity (because it may be the only such opportunity in your career) is a powerful reframing technique. Rather than letting unique opportunities go to waste, setting goals with this mindset helps you squeeze every drop of learning from even the most challenging circumstances.

Remove distractions

Although intentional learners face the same distractions and expectations their peers do, they protect time for learning. Because no set of decisions is more personal than how you use your time and balance your responsibilities, there isn't a single formula for making time to learn. However the strategies of intentional learners share three traits to make and protect time for learning in a busy day:

- *Carefully evaluate yourself and make a plan.* Start with an honest self-analysis of what we call your personal operating model. What choices are you making about your priorities, roles, time, and energy? Do your choices align with the goals that you care about? Consider activities you should add but, more important, consider what you must eliminate to meet your goals.

- **Be mindful in the moment.** Even with the best intentions, things will get in the way of learning. Ready yourself for the deeper work of learning by minimizing distractions in your environment and managing your energy. Separate yourself from your devices. Take a walk before you start a long period of focus. Set an alarm reminding you to stretch every hour. Set up your workspace to eliminate distractions.
- **Conduct experiments and be flexible.** It may take time and iteration to find what works for you. Consider small experiments and reflect on how successfully they help you reinvest some of your time. Nothing works perfectly but, perhaps more important, nothing works forever. Commit yourself to being intentional about learning and protecting time, but be open to flexing specific strategies as your circumstances change.

Actively seek actionable feedback

Feedback is a familiar principle to most professionals; even when we don't love receiving it, we understand its benefits. Intentional learners are different because they not only seek feedback but also pursue it voraciously. Without it, they recognize, they may have blind spots that halt their progress. As you seek feedback, do these things:

- **Prime others.** Focus people on what you are working on. After an important meeting, many of us have probably asked a colleague, "What did you think?" It's very different to say to someone before a meeting, "I'm working on managing my reactions when my ideas are challenged. I'd love for you to watch for that and give me feedback after the meeting." Broadcasting what you are working on increases your chances of receiving tailored, actionable feedback.
- **Press for details.** Feedback is most helpful when it's actionable, and actionable feedback most often comes from details and examples. If someone comments that you seemed defensive

during a meeting, probe for more information. Did my defensiveness show up in my facial expressions or body language? Did my tone of voice change? What did I say that suggested this reaction?

- **Decide how to treat feedback.** This might seem surprising, but how you judge your ability to handle and act on feedback plays a critical role in the way an intentional learner responds to it. You may actively seek feedback, but you do not have to act on (or even believe) every comment. Feedback is data you collect to help you improve, but in the end you are in control of what to do with it.
- **Seek experts.** It is difficult to grow when you don't know what good looks like. By seeking out someone who already has expertise—say, an executive who has achieved the role you aspire to rise to or someone who is deeply skilled in the area in which you are interested—you have a pattern for how to advance. Expertise is made up of nuanced skills. An expert can give you insights that a peer simply cannot.

Practice deliberately in areas you want to grow in

Practice, especially practice in context, is absolutely critical to learning. The pattern of trying, failing, refining your approach, and trying again is at the heart of building all behavioral skills. After studying the development of expertise across varied domains, such as athletics, aviation, medicine, and music, psychologist K. Anders Ericsson determined that there is a "scientific approach to developing expertise" and that "consistently and overwhelmingly, the evidence showed that experts are always made, not born."⁴

Many of us believe that practice makes perfect, but that classic proverb isn't specific enough. Doing things over and over does little to build your skills. Instead, Ericsson suggests, "deliberate practice" creates expertise. Deliberate practice is "focused

⁴ Edward T Cokely, K. Anders Ericsson, and Michael J. Prietula, "The making of an expert," *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 2007, hbr.org.

activity aimed at *just the right level of challenge* to extend expertise.”⁵ In other words, effective practice is aimed at the skill gaps just beyond your current set of skills. It is practice that Goldilocks would appreciate—not too hard, not too easy, and not too repetitive of what you can already do, but at just the right level of challenge, focused on precisely the skill you need. When it comes to being deliberate, we believe that this quality is not only a critical differentiator for intentional learners but also,

in application, usually markedly different from what most of us do (exhibit).

Practice regular reflection

Metacognition, or reflecting on and directing your own thinking, plays a critical role in all cognitive tasks, including your ability to reflect on and learn from situations. Reflection is a diagnostic skill that helps you evaluate yourself and determine your learning needs, both in light of your own past

Exhibit

Deliberate practice may not be what it seems.

People often ...



... **make the focus of practice too expansive.** You set a goal to improve your presentation skills, but this skill involves so many nuanced elements that you're unlikely to improve markedly without a more detailed articulation of the problem. Simply presenting in a hundred different situations may help reduce your nervousness but won't do much to build your skills.

Instead, you should ...



... **narrow your focus to the nuances.** What is it about your presentation skills that needs practice? Perhaps you need to break the habit of using filler words when presenting. Focusing on a detailed skill will help you make recognizable and significant progress toward your goal.



... **spend too much time on the same skill.** When you're good at something, it generally feels good to keep doing it. Seeing improvements may tempt you to keep practicing the same skill. But once you've started to improve, practicing the same things doesn't propel you forward. In fact, it may actually undermine your efforts to build expertise, making you overly reliant on gut instinct.



... **narrow in on specific areas and items in which you are not yet skilled.** As your skills evolve, focus on those things that require you to stretch.



... **wait for formal opportunities, such as learning courses, to build new skills.** Formal learning is a powerful tool. We believe that the focused energy of a well-designed learning experience can be just the boost that many people need to accelerate their practice. But we also know that you don't have to wait for such opportunities.



... **be opportunistic about practice opportunities.** A hallmark of intentional learners is that they capitalize on every chance to improve. Every phone call with a customer, every meeting, every interaction with your team or manager is an opportunity to practice. Keep your focus on developing skills and actively work on this all the time. Spend ten minutes before a call preparing your approach. Practice your presentation in a mirror. Ask a colleague to role-play a difficult conversation with you. Try to find the learning opportunity in everything you do.

⁵ Ruth Colvin Clark, *Building Expertise: Cognitive Methods for Training and Performance*, third edition, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008, p. 202.

performance and in comparison with recognized experts. Reflection helps you unpack your actions, to refine the component pieces, and then to put those pieces back together in a way that improves your performance.

Reflection that promotes learning happens in three primary moments—before, during, and after a task. Forecasting a cognitive task simply means looking ahead. In these moments, we are thinking ahead about how we might tackle a task, how we will approach a problem, or what we will say during a difficult conversation. We're reflecting on what's coming. This process of forecasting or planning primes us to learn. When we reflect during an event, we can correct our course and make adjustments. We notice what is happening even as we are "in the arena" and can learn and experiment in the moment. Finally, retrospective reflection lets us look at a past situation, consider how effective our actions were, and then project forward to how we would approach a similar event in the future.

Among reflection's many benefits two stand out. First is the correlation between reflection and self-efficacy. At the core of learning is your belief that you can learn, that you can improve, and that you can take the steps necessary to achieve desired levels of performance. Reflection begins a virtuous cycle of building confidence, which reinforces the feeling that we are capable, which primes us to become more capable. Confidence builds resolve to take on increasingly hard challenges, which strengthen existing skills and build new ones. Reflecting on those challenges in turn breeds additional confidence—and on and on and on.⁶

Equally important, reflection lowers a person's barrier to change. The best problem solvers try new strategies when old ones are no longer working. We work in a fast-paced world, and unfamiliarity, particularly in the face of time pressures, can be a major obstacle. Reflection builds cognitive familiarity with new processes. Because you have thought about something before and are always thinking about how to refine and improve, concerns about making changes become less powerful.

Our ability to reflect is threatened on many fronts. Being overscheduled, overworked, and overloaded affects our ability to pause and assess our circumstances and performance. But the noisier the world around us, the greater the need for dedicated reflection time. Intentional learners not only engage in reflection but also, in many cases, ritualize it. They create consistent and predictable patterns, both for when they will reflect and what they will think about. They establish strategies for capturing these thoughts and referring back to them often. By relying on ritual, learners reduce the number of decisions associated with reflection (for example, when, what, and how), so it becomes easier to return to the practice repeatedly.

The level of intention we bring to improving our performance readies us for challenges, prepares us to raise our skills when needed, and ultimately keeps us inspired and engaged. Intentional learning is an investment we make in ourselves, but it is equally an investment we make in our professions, our families, our communities, our organizations, and the world at large. In that way, it just might be the most fundamental skill for professionals to cultivate.

⁶ Giada Di Stefano, Francesca Gino, Gary Pisano and Bradley Staats, *Learning by thinking: How reflection aids performance*, Harvard Business School working paper, March 2014, hbswk.hbs.edu.

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