4 Simple Techniques to Remember Everything You Learn

Entrepreneurial education is a lifelong pursuit.

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Aristotle once compared the human memory to a wax tablet that starts out hot and pliable, but cools down to something hard and difficult to impress. For a long time, this was the prevailing view of our ability to learn, i.e. when we're young, our brains are in prime learning condition, but as we age, we find it increasingly difficult to acquire new skills. In layman's terms: You can't teach an old dog new tricks … or can you?

Recent research has thrown this long-standing belief into question, demonstrating that other factors, such as an older person's confidence in their ability to learn, are also at play. So, if we stop thinking that our brain agility is eroding by the minute, we might actually be able to learn something. And in today's knowledge economy, in which the capacity to quickly pick up new skills is more valuable than ever, this is great news for entrepreneurs looking to make themselves and their teams more competitive.

As a CEO, I read industry publications and blogs daily, plus at least one nonfiction book at all times. I hire world-class consultants who keep our employees up-to-date on the latest tools and strategies, and we've been able to make tremendous progress in areas where our competency needed shoring up, e.g. SEO.

A dedication to learning, however, is just the first step. Metacognitive activities such as thinking about one's own thinking by reflecting, planning and monitoring can significantly facilitate learning as well. With all this in mind, I wanted to share some personal and research-backed techniques for becoming a better lifelong student.

But first, a look at why learning can be your most valuable asset.

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1. Start with spaced repetition.

Whether you're learning to play the saxophone or studying a foreign language, repeating scales or reviewing vocabulary is the only path to mastery. Practice, or repetition, makes perfect. There's a scientific explanation for why this works. Repetition increases the myelin, or fatty coating, around the axioms that connect our brain's neurons. The more myelin, the faster our neurons work, and the better we learn something.

As it turns out, spacing out the repetition, rather than cramming it into one session, is even more effective. Demonstrating the power of spaced repetition, Gabriel Wyner, author of *In Fluent Forever: How to Learn Any Language and Never Forget It*, writes:

> *"In a four-month period, practicing for 30 minutes a day, you can expect to learn and retain 3,600 flashcards with 90 to 95 percent accuracy. These flashcards can teach you an alphabet, vocabulary, grammar and even pronunciation. And they can do it without becoming tedious, because they're always challenging enough to remain interesting and fun."*

So not only do we drum up our retention, but we also avoid the pitfalls of waning enthusiasm, aka boredom.

To use this learning technique, start by establishing a manageable study schedule. Then, I'd recommend choosing a method for storing and organizing information. In the old days, that meant flashcards, but today we have handy software options like Evernote and SuperMemo. And don't forget to test yourself periodically. Tracking your progress will boost your motivation to continue.

2. Take time for reflection.

Reflection can be hugely valuable to learning and improving performance on the job. Harvard professor Francesca Gino and her colleagues found that employees who spent 15 minutes at the end of the day reflecting about lessons learned performed 23 percent better after 10 days than those who didn't.

In addition to solidifying what we've already learned, reflection also helps spark new ideas.I've had some of my best product ideas when I'm not working. During my morning workout or a walk after lunch, I'll come up with the perfect solution to an issue that's been bugging me for weeks.

As psychologist Scott Barry Kaufman explains, "Our most creative ideas don't tend to come when we're consciously focused on the problem. Great insights come through interacting with people, gaining experiences and letting your mind make connections." In fact, Kaufman found that 72 percent of people get new ideas … where else? The shower. These "shower ideas" are the result of reflection, as our brains make connections between information that we've already consumed. That's why I encourage employees to actually use their vacation days. After genuine time off, they return to the office more energized, and often with new insight in tow.

3. Break it down.

I'm sure teachers will agree that the best way to learn

something is to explain it to someone else. That's why the first step in Nobel Prize-winning physicist Richard Feynman's learning formula is: Teach it to a child. Or at least map out how you would explain something to a child. As Feynman once said, "If you can't explain it in simple terms, then you don't understand it."

If you try to break down a concept to its simplest terms, you'll quickly realize whether you truly grasp it or whether you have knowledge gaps. And when we encounter those gaps, Feynman's technique suggests returning to the source material and re-learning what's missing.

When my wife was pregnant with our second child, I decided to take three months of (mostly) uninterrupted parental leave. To do so, I would have to delegate a large portion of my responsibilities to my employees. Months in advance, I started walking colleagues through each task step-by-step. I soon realized that in teaching them how to do my job, I was strengthening my own skills, as well as recognizing areas where I needed brushing up.

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4. Transfer what you learn.

I think we can all agree that Elon Musk has an extraordinary learning aptitude. From software and energy to transportation and aerospace, the rocket-company CEO is a true polymath, or expert in various fields. But Musk's wide-range of knowledge is actually integral to his learning ability, because taking what we study in one context and applying to another helps deepen our understanding of both. It's a technique called learning transfer, and based on Musk's interviews, he uses a two-step process. First, he deconstructs the knowledge into its fundamental principles. Then, he reconstructs it in a new field. Let's say you're studying Italian but also want to become a better cook. You can simply

take a cooking class, or you take a cooking class in Italian. Chances are, the latter will strengthen your grasp of Italian *and* making a mean spaghetti Bolognese. Another plus to becoming a polymath is it can lead to innovation. For example, a burr stuck in a dog's fur became the design inspiration for velcro.

Entrepreneurs and their organizations have much to gain by committing to continual learning, but on a personal level, I think that this approach also makes for a richer day-to-day experience. Just have confidence in yourself and you'll see: You can teach any dog a new trick.

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