Improving Your Ability to Learn Means Leaving Your Comfort Zone

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In grade school, I was taught that learning came from studious labor, the discipline of memorization and retention of facts.

I carried this same mindset with me into college and later into my first job as a junior programmer.

It wasn't until years later when I became an entrepreneur that I came across a quote by author Josh Waitzkin that completely changed my perspective. "The key to pursuing excellence is to embrace an organic, long-term learning process, and not to live in a shell of static, safe mediocrity," he wrote. "Usually, growth comes at the expense of previous comfort or safety."

Since that epiphanous moment, I've established several practices to help me improve my ability to learn that I'd like to share with you.

Don't just rely on books — find a trusted mentor

Hear me out, I'm a huge proponent of being a voracious reader. That said, improving our ability to learn and acquiring new insights doesn't *only* come from reading books — it also comes from new experiences and connections we make.

I'd like to offer an example from my own life. When I first

started my company, Jotform, 16 years ago, I read every business book I could get my hands on. Whenever a problem would arise, I'd look to one of my books for a solution. The thing is, many budding entrepreneurs and startups are often blindsided by unexpected scenarios — like dealing with a troublesome employee — and may not find the practical advice they seek within those pages.

For instance, a book might offer an authoritative stance on handling issues with one of your team members, but every situation isn't the same, and some require more gentleness and finesse. That's why I'm a firm believer in finding a trusted mentor, someone who's been where you are and understands the nuances of soft skills and can guide you in making the right decisions.

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Spend time with people who are different from you

Many of us unwittingly get trapped in a bubble of the same crowd. Those with similar interests and affinities to us — we go to lunch together, send each other memes and often feel truly in sync with one another. There's nothing wrong with this, but one of the most illuminating things I've discovered while running my business has involved the insights learned from people who are completely different to myself.

Why, you might ask? Because they offer fresh perspectives that make me think differently — they force me to leave my comfort zone. Spending time with people unlike us also does something else: it improves our "learning agility" — the ability to stay flexible and grow from our mistakes.

So, how to put this into practice exactly? By remaining open. By reaching out to colleagues you might normally not gravitate

towards and offering to take them out for a coffee. But mostly, by practicing active listening.

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Take time to reflect

I'm going to be honest here: it's likely that there's not a day that goes by that you aren't in some way staring at a screen. Your computer, your smartphone, your TV — and every other device under the sun. We're taking in information at a colossal speed (a lot of this is good, because we're remaining informed and finding comfort in being entertained after two extremely hard years).

Yet, the late American author and psychotherapist, Richard Carlson, wisely noted that reflection is "one of the most underused yet powerful tools for success."

But how often are we actually doing it?

Here's an activity I frequently enjoy and encourage my team to try out: Take some time to listen to one of your favorite podcasts or audiobooks, and then go out for a walk — in a park or around your neighborhood. This alone time without distractions or interruptions helps your mind clear out any external noise and process what you've just absorbed.

This is especially vital for us as entrepreneurs, as honing our reflective learning helps us step back from the daily grind and develop our critical thinking skills.

Embrace challenges

At Jotform, we recently unveiled our first new brand in over a decade. It's been an exciting time watching our company grow without any outside funding to 10 million users. I relay this

news not to brag, but to reassure you that all of this didn't come about without its challenges.

In the early days of building my startup, finding the right people was one of my main concerns. I wasn't interested in hiring merely based on a person's skills and talent – I also wanted to make sure they'd be a good fit for the culture I was trying to build.

Over the years, as we scaled, our challenges became more complex. But what I want to say is this: one of the greatest ways that has improved my own ability to learn was to embrace these tests, rather than cave under their pressure.

Harvard Business Review contributors J.P. Flaum and Becky Winkler explain that "in order to learn from such challenges, the individual must remain present and engaged, handle the stress brought on by ambiguity and adapt quickly in order to perform," they write. "This requires observation and listening skills, and the ability to process data quickly."

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Keep stretching yourself

A pivotal moment for me in my life was leaving my native country of Turkey and choosing to study Computer Science at the University of Bridgeport in the United States.

Needless to say, venturing into unknown territory enhanced my capacity to learn and adapt at an advanced rate. Living in a foreign country meant learning new mindsets, customs and ways of doing things – all of which was conducive to learning. I consider it one of the best decisions I've ever made.

Because it's these kinds of risks that lead to opportunity – the kind that push you outside of your comfort zone and ultimately instills confidence in your abilities.

Later when I started my own business, I maintained this approach of taking progressive risks – continually innovating and defining my own vision of success. All of this without $0 in outside funding.

Stretching yourself doesn’t necessarily mean upending your life and moving to another country. It’s about taking bigger steps than you normally would; it’s about allowing yourself to embrace new experiences, even as they may be challenging or uncomfortable.

It involves leaving your sense of safety behind to harness your ability to grow.

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