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# LEARNING FROM SUCCESS AND FAILURE



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Ever since Morgan McCall published the now famous learning mantra for executive development – known as “the 70:20:10 rule” – it has become one of the most frequently cited executive development principles. The basic message is that most learning (70%) takes place through “experience in a role” whereas “coaching sessions” and “training programs” account for relatively little learning in practice, 20% and 10% respectively. Few have questioned McCall’s principle, and it has gained widespread acceptance in executive and leadership development practice. It is surprising, however, how little attention has been paid to how, specifically, senior executives learn from experience and how to enhance that learning.

In the early stages of their careers, people often try to learn from the experience of others because they lack experience themselves. They observe role models or study well-known leaders. They seek advice from experienced leaders or read case studies and biographies about how they achieved success. Role models and their successful experiences provide invaluable guidance on how to replicate their success.

As their responsibilities increase, most senior executives realize that case studies about the achievements of others lack relevance to their own context and that their own experience is not only unique but also one of the richest sources of learning.

In this article, we explore three questions related to how senior executives learn the most from their experiences:

- Can highly experienced executives continue to learn from their experiences in senior executive roles? Do they have the will to learn as much as they could?
- Do executives learn from the consequences of their actions – whether the outcome is success or failure?
- What disables learning in senior executive roles?

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## 1. ARE EXECUTIVES WILLING TO LEARN?

When we ask senior executives if they like to learn, most respond with an unhesitating “yes.” When asked **what** they would like to learn, they often list the latest developments in strategy, technology, digitization, social media and so on, something they have heard of or read about but have not had time to catch up on. Some raise their most salient leadership issues: How can I better align my top team? How do I shift the culture and mindset of my organization to be more cost/innovation/quality/safety focused? They ask about the latest “toolboxes” for fixing teams or cultures. But when asked, “And what about yourself, what are you learning about being a more effective leader?” they quickly point to the rich and complex experiences of their role. And when pressed for an example of something they have learned from their leadership experience in the past year, they look puzzled and may share a trivial example of saying the wrong thing in public. It would appear that executives can recognise their shortcomings in knowledge areas, but they are reluctant to engage in processes of self-examination and self-reflection.

The meaning of learning has shifted over recent decades. Today, knowledge is freely available to anyone. Learning to search the internet allows anyone to acquire knowledge with a single click. Over the past 50 years, the pedagogical methods of all educational institutions have begun to place more emphasis on exploration and discovery as well as learning how to learn. This has also led to a shift in attitudes toward lifelong learning. So, it is now well understood that learning only stops if we choose to let it stop.

The distinction between learning as **acquiring knowledge** and learning as **discovery and exploration** is becoming more significant. Human beings are naturally curious from early childhood. Their cognitive capabilities allow them to make sense of the world through exploring and testing hypotheses that explain why things happen. Watch [this video](#) to see how curious children are to learn. Notice how the child can marvel at her shadow and quickly link her movements to those of the shadow. This young girl might one day become a competent photographer, perhaps because of her curiosity on that day. Eventually she will learn or discover that shadows are affected by the position of the sun or another source of light, and that they can be disfigured by uneven terrain, creating the potential for photographic effects.

Curiosity tends to be much greater in early life and wanes as the world becomes more predictable. Senior executives’ experiences brim with opportunities to learn, but the desire to learn from experience is easily disabled. While learning through formal instruction might be acceptable, learning through discovery and exploration can be met with contempt or even resistance. Such responses are defenses to learning, perhaps because discovery and exploration are linked to childhood. Exploration leads to discovering new things. Learning by discovery might imply that they don’t know it all. Perhaps that can be a little humiliating given their executive role and status.

Most executive experiences offer rich learning opportunities. Every senior executive context is different, no matter how hard executives try to make them predictable. If there is a will to learn, learning through exploration can mean a very real process of discovery – the discovery of unique truths that no one yet knows and that only apply to a particular learner in a specific context. For almost a decade we have been asking executives to reflect on their experiences of success and failure to help them learn about themselves and their own leadership. That is not as easy as it sounds. Can an executive simply invoke their desire to learn? Success and failure both generate strong emotional responses and these influence the desire to learn. Learning from a failure will also be limited by what a person’s self-esteem can handle.

## 2. WHAT CAN EXECUTIVES LEARN FROM SUCCESS AND FAILURE?

It is well documented in the development literature that new roles and experiences offer perfect learning opportunities. From teenagers taking a gap year to executives taking on a new assignment in a different culture, the learning philosophy is that such experiences help

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anyone who undertakes them to grow. Assignments in different cultures constantly test one's assumptions. The mantra here is to question and explore whatever brought success in the past, which implies remaining open to learning. Many people have reported significant learning from expatriate assignments, but few are able to articulate this more precisely beyond "growing." New contexts are great sources of learning as they enable people to question their assumptions, find out what they take for granted, and in a way, rewire their brain.

As executives acquire more responsibilities, the tolerance for learning and growth diminishes. We expect CEOs and senior executives to have completed most of their learning and growth – they should have most of the answers. The first few months in a new role are their chance to establish their authority, so they are also given a period of grace to learn about the new context. Once they are established, however, is there any need to continue learning? Is it harder to learn after being in a role for some time? Obviously, there is a need to continue to learn, but when executives take up senior roles, they tend to establish beliefs and assumptions that are hard to break. Their daily experiences and the organization's routines confirm those beliefs. So how do senior executives question their assumptions and sustain learning once established in a role when other people expect them to know it all and have all the answers?

There are two fundamental barriers to learning from experiences in a senior executive role. The first is that as executives acquire greater responsibilities, their learning moves from universal truths to being context specific. They can too easily believe that experiences can generate learning in the form of simple formulae or rules of thumb such as "build a good team around you." But learning is likely to be far more complex than a simple explanation can convey. Moreover, successful people are rarely able to pinpoint the precise reason for their achievement. Warren Buffet is a perfect illustration. When asked how he became one of the most successful investors of his era, he usually answers something like, "Reinvest your profits" or "Limit what you borrow," etc. These are general principles and rules of thumb that most senior executives have read about in books or learned with a few years of experience. Buffet is probably not being evasive; most likely he does not know the reason behind his successful intuition and judgment.

The same can be said about failure. Learning from failure might seem an obvious source of learning, but the same problems arise. What was the real cause of the failure? Did they hire the wrong person? Did they fail to manage upward? Or was the failure specific to the context? Most executives already know that hiring the right person or managing upward is essential to success. So, what did they really learn from the experience? The potential learning will be related to the context at the time. Why, in this context, did they fail to hire the right person or fail to manage upward? What else was going on?

Most learning at senior executive levels is context specific. In other words, what works in one situation will not necessarily work in another. Simple rules of thumb are useful in the initial stages of a career and are easy to pass on, but their utility diminishes in senior executive roles. In fact, an over-reliance on rules of thumb learned in other contexts can lead to failure.

The second problem of learning from experience is emotional contamination. Successful experiences make us feel great. Failure makes us feel sad or angry. These emotional responses make it difficult to learn. Success will likely create a positive sensation and a desire for recognition and self-congratulation, but such emotions only help to confirm the person's assumptions and delude them into thinking they have what it takes. Who would want to spoil that feeling? The learning here tends to simply confirm that the person did the right thing. Thus, any particular action that was taken prior to the successful outcome is believed to have contributed to – or even caused – the success. Learning from a success will be limited by the desire to maintain one's carefully developed positive self-esteem. People love to accept responsibility for their successes and replicate them to ensure they generate more of that great feeling. We might thus avoid learning to avoid unpleasant feelings or to sustain pleasant ones.

Many people say that some of their most painful experiences also generate significant learning. It is easy to see, however, that emotion plays a key role in determining what people learn: the

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desire to feel better or competent means that a person might draw learnings that over-simplify the learning, or externalize the mistake to make them feel better. However, as time passes, the pain diminishes and it can be easier to reflect more deeply on the underlying causes of failure. This clearly demonstrates how much people manage their beliefs about their competence and self-esteem when they learn. Narratives about failures or mistakes are a reminder that everyone is vulnerable – they put people in touch with their fragility, and unless they can face into the deeper learning, failure narratives can make them overly cautious and remind them to avoid pain in the future by “playing it safe.”

### **3. THE LEARNING DISABILITIES OF EXECUTIVE ROLES**

Although most executives say they want to learn, most are unaware of the learning disabilities – the unconscious protective mechanisms that reinforce their self-esteem and sense of self-worth. Defensive behaviors are frequently used by people, regardless of their role, to protect their self-esteem. Everyone exhibits defensiveness from time to time and in varying degrees depending on their role, but some people act defensively more often than others, closing off opportunities for learning. However, when senior executives take up the enormous responsibilities attached to their role, research evidence suggests that their executive behaviors become more defensive. This defensiveness becomes more apparent as they protect themselves from the mounting threats to their competence and their person. If executives say they have not experienced these mounting threats in their role, it might mean that the unconscious protection mechanisms are working very well.

What is underpinning such defensive behaviors is a desire by senior executives to protect their self-esteem at the expense of learning. The inner drivers of defensive behaviors are an unrealistic view of themselves. People who act defensively either grossly overestimate or underestimate themselves and constantly devalue their own worth. This self-delusion flows over into relations with others. Those who overestimate themselves usually deny their need for others and become “loners.” Those who underestimate their need for others seek to bolster themselves by becoming emotionally over-dependent on others and have a constant need for the approval of others. Both strategies are self-defeating. Loners become increasingly alienated, lonely, empty and unfulfilled and all they can do is reassert their false superiority more strongly. Those who over-depend on others reinforce their low self-esteem through their dependence, which prevents them from feeling worthy. As their feeling of worthlessness increases, so does their dependency, which further decreases their feeling of self-worth. So, unrealistic assessments of oneself tend to develop into vicious spirals and “self-fulfilling prophecies.”

Self-evaluations result from life experiences categorized as successes or failures. People avoid activities if their self-concept predicts that they will perform so badly as to humiliate themselves. If someone tells themselves, “I am hopeless with technology,” they will probably avoid technology and miss out on the opportunity to improve their ability to use technology. A negative self-image limits learning and results in too much importance being given to occasional critical remarks from others and in overlooking or discounting praise by others of one’s abilities or characteristics. Even worse, a negative self-image can be communicated to new acquaintances even before they have had a chance to form their own impression. One example is when someone typically starts expressing their opinion with “I may be wrong, but...” or “I don’t know whether it’s worth mentioning, but....” Others usually learn not to place much weight on their remarks and quickly stop listening and often talk over them, and the person trying to get their point across increasingly fails to get beyond the apology and reach their idea. Thus, low self-evaluation becomes a reality and shuts off any chance of further learning with comments such as “Well, that’s just the way I am.” This is not self-acceptance, it is self-stereotyping.

These observable defensive behaviors affect a person’s ability to communicate with others. Their input is reduced and distorted because they seek to maintain their personal delusions

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rather than look for valid data. They censor their output to maintain an unrealistic image of themselves and others. They are locked into one or two interpersonal dimensions or operate only on one end of a dimension so that they can only ever be submissive, never powerful. They act compulsively instead of choosing between several options. Powerful senior executives, for example, might see all situations in terms of their possibilities for staying in control of the situation. They cannot relax and enjoy following the lead of others or simply enjoy being among equals. Achievement-oriented scientists see situations only in terms of work and goal achievement and, in fact, they may fail in their achievement because they are unable to see or handle power relations. Hostile people distrust others and see only cues to release their anger; they may be unable to respond when others express their affection for them. Yet organizational culture colludes with such defensive behavior in that people respect the powerful and despise the submissive. They also value affection but fear the expression of anger. Finally, they praise achievement and are suspicious of self-expression and self-indulgence.

### **We are all defensive...**

If defensive behavior is self-defeating, why do people still behave that way? Underlying all defensive behavior is anxiety and fear. Threats to one's self-esteem cause psychological discomfort, which may be as strong as, or even stronger than, physical pain. The ability to cope with such threats eliminates the discomfort and enhances feelings of success and high self-esteem, which in turn will likely increase the ability to cope with the threat if it recurs. However, remaining in a threatening situation and taking realistic coping action requires courage and time and usually involves enduring immediate discomfort to gain in the longer term, so people more frequently opt for quick, palliative actions that eliminate the immediate discomfort but fail to solve the problem.

A person who is upset is more likely to respond aggressively or by withdrawing from the situation. These are basic fight-or-flight reactions, which is a common characteristic of all living beings.

At work, "people problems" are usually linked to these basic fight-or-flight reactions. When a person has an aggressive reaction, it releases their immediate tension so they feel better momentarily, but it rarely eliminates threats to their psychological identity, as can sometimes be the case when the response serves to protect one's physical existence. Withdrawing from a situation can remove the threat temporarily but does not help handle the problem if it recurs. Aggression and withdrawal often feel rewarding in the moment because they provide temporary relief from anxiety and fear, so such behaviors tend to be repeated in similar situations. This causes people to become locked in an unproductive way of dealing with anxiety-producing situations.

Psychiatrists, psychoanalysts and psychologists have catalogued and named the labyrinthine paths that people can invent to deny reality. But all these paths begin with self-deception. Although people may try to deceive others, they are the first victims of their attempts to distort reality. A common denominator of all self-delusion is the attempt to escape the fact that we are all human, vulnerable and imperfect.

For example, if others expect you to be a loving child, parent, teacher or spouse, and you believe this too, then you may find it difficult to accept that, at this moment, you are angry toward and resentful of the person you are supposed to love. Faced with this unacceptable resentment, what can you do? There are several ways to avoid or withdraw from this situation.

- You can **intellectualize or rationalize** your thinking to separate your thinking from your emotions. This can even give you a substitute reward as you conduct an intellectual argument with the person who has aroused your feelings. As the argument is intellectual, you can have the luxury of pretending that there are no bad feelings involved.
- You could construct an elaborate double disguise and adopt behaviors and attitudes that are the opposite of what you feel. You can make jokes or smother the person who concerns

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you with fake affection and become as “sweet as a razor.” This is often referred to as **passive aggression**.

- You can become **self-righteous** to convince yourself of your moral perfection.
- You might abandon your adulthood and **regress** to a childlike state, becoming dependent, clingy, sulky and deviously manipulative.
- You could avoid contact altogether and escape to a **fantasy world**. This was the way of life of James Thurber’s Walter Mitty in “The Secret Life of Walter Mitty.” In your fantasy land, you can recue your anxieties by imagining that all is sweetness, love and light. Alternatively, you could portray yourself as dangerous and destructive without suffering the penalties of being so in reality.
- The other main avenue available is **aggression**, which can also take several forms. Interestingly, an **aggressive response** offers more hope of coping realistically in the long run because it is more open and keeps you and the person who concerns you more informed about what you are feeling.
- A common aggressive mechanism is **projection**. Rather than owning your resentment, you could blame the person who concerns you for your own “shortcoming” by accusing them of what makes you feel guilty. You then experience a sense of righteous indignation that gives your self-esteem a momentary “high.” “I am not resentful; you resent me. I can see it in your eyes.” This reflects the old adage, “attack is the best form of defense.” Of course, this is likely to provoke an aggressive response and thus may not relieve anxiety, even in the short run.
- You might also deflect your resentment onto someone else less powerful, or even to an object, for example by kicking the cat or pounding a pillow (**displacement**). Because this is not directed at the person you are supposed to love, you can pretend that you do not resent them; you have just had “a hard day” or feel “out of sorts.”
- You could also regress to aggressive childish behavior and throw a tantrum (**regression**). While this reveals how you feel to yourself and the other, you can readily write it off afterward as unimportant and meaningless – or even rather cute.

Any of these methods can be used to reduce immediate anxiety and avoid feeling that you, like all human beings, are vulnerable but changeable. Everyone experiences a wide range of feelings and expresses them in ways that not everyone will find acceptable.

Executive roles can make people defensive because they force executives to play “public relations officer,” to hide feelings of hurt, anger, resent, love, sexiness or whatever other characteristic is currently forbidden or considered inappropriate. The problem with these defense mechanisms is that they reinforce an unrealistic self-image and result in behavior that fails to resolve, in the long term, the situation that is being avoided. For example, one may feel resentful toward a loved one, and even if one party or the other feels that it is irrational, stupid, silly, bad or immoral, it does not change the fact that the resentment is there, and denying it or confusing it does not help either side to cope with it effectively. Most seriously, such self-delusion lays the foundation for ongoing failure to deal realistically with future anxiety-producing situations. The divisions one creates within oneself lead to inner disputes and sap one’s personal energy and further reduce one’s self-esteem and ability to learn from experience.

Another form of executive defense can be to forsake authenticity and develop a phony “PR personality.” Social media constantly feeds the notion that people must conform to the tastes and values of others. In fact, so much time is spent simulating an approved image or mask that some people even reject or suppress aspects of themselves that do not conform to this image and they lose contact with their self.

The purpose of our defenses is to boost our authority. We can appear knowledgeable about certain things, for example by reading articles about the latest art fad, consulting various

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authorities about music or interior decorating, and reading synopses of current or classical books rather than the books themselves, all in an effort to create the impression of being a connoisseur. However, this completely disregards the experience afforded by these things and when these people do go to a concert or an art gallery, they are likely to be bored or, at best, numb. They are unable to feel anything because they have not learned how to open themselves to experiences. Or, more correctly, they have unlearned what once came naturally to them as children. When they attend concerts, they are more concerned about how they should feel rather than allowing themselves to live and respond to the experience. They are afraid to allow themselves this freedom in case they respond inappropriately and give themselves away.

### **Role or person?**

Everyone exhibits defensiveness from time to time and in varying degrees depending on their role. But some people act defensively more often than others, closing off opportunities for learning. The end result of excessive defensiveness is neuroticism. Neurotic people create idealized pictures of themselves. For example, compliant persons want to be so obliging that everyone will love them. Dominant persons want to be so outstanding that everyone will look up to them. Everyone has idealized images of themselves that provide them with direction, goals and values. But neurotic people can be compulsive. They are engaged in a never-ending struggle to mould themselves into the perfect being that they not only aspire to be but feel they must be right now. They set ever higher standards and channel more and more of their energy into striving to be infallible and invulnerable. They need to be superior to others in every regard. They must never be late, no matter what the circumstances. Their car must also be perfect and never have engine failure. Their family, needless to say, is an extension of themselves and must therefore also be perfect. Neurotic people live in an obsessional fantasy world and resent reality when, despite their greatest efforts, it encroaches on their perfectionist's dream castle.

In some ways, this type of person might be precisely the sort of person a shareholder would want to lead their organization – someone who will be obsessed about perfection and high-quality standards and ultimately exceed performance goals and expectations. It serves the interests of the shareholder, although it may not always serve the person or their relationships in the organizations. But these are necessarily the concerns or motivations of shareholders, so there is evidence that the latter tend to hire well-defended people for senior executive roles.

There is also evidence that the role of the senior executive brings out defensive behaviors. In other words, when we ask a person with a "normal" level of defensiveness to take up an executive role, they will begin to exhibit more defensiveness. They will do this to protect themselves because senior executive roles are inherently more threatening. There are more demands from multiple stakeholders than for any other role. In such circumstances, being defensive is sensible. Not defending themselves can make executives appear weak. Yet at the same time this defensiveness will inhibit their learning by altering their sense of reality and creating self-delusions.

In Arthur Miller's play, "Death of a Salesman," there is a dramatic portrayal of the collapse of a competent person when his idealized image is shattered. He had built up a false image of himself as a supersalesman, indispensable to his firm, known and admired by everyone in the business. When he is fired, he is destroyed.

Learning is a choice. You can choose to attend courses to show people you have a learning orientation. That would be part of your image as a learning person. But, as senior executives, learning from experience begins with exploring your successes and failures. Ultimately, if you adopt a learning mindset, most learning will come from your day-to-day experiences. You can choose to be vulnerable and learn from those experiences, and you can choose to defend yourself and reinforce your executive authority. Executives need to constantly remind themselves of the tendency of the role, which is to default to defensiveness at the expense of learning.



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## The IMD CEO Learning Center

The CEO role is one of the most challenging roles in the 21st century. Increasing pressures for real-time transparency and accountability and increasing globalization mean CEOs are open to frequent criticism from multiple stakeholders around the world. The purpose of the IMD CEO Learning Center is to explore and understand the context, motivation and capacity for learning of CEOs, senior executives and their organizations. It creates learning spaces for CEOs to explore and maximize their learning from their experiences through dialogue, narrative and experimentation.

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