

# Five routines that help leaders learn

## Abstract

Leadership involves learning to face new and more challenging goals, but past success can result in developing counterproductive attitudes toward learning. Four counterproductive attitudes that often arise from past success include overconfidence, expectations of top performance, belief in consistent and predictable progress, and overvaluing the role of mental toughness. We propose five strategies to help leaders overcome these counterproductive attitudes that we call learning routines: 1) generating positive emotions when facing new challenges, 2) seeking creative solutions to problems, 3) believing you can learn in the face of frustration, challenge, and setbacks, 4) approaching new problems with flexibility, and 5) seeking feedback, coaching, and developmental opportunities. Research and theory-based approaches are proposed for cultivating these five routines to support leadership development and practice.

## Keywords

Leadership development  
Learning  
Attitudes  
Learning routines

Organizations face a common problem. They hire and promote new leaders based on their past successes. But these successes often result in developing counterproductive attitudes that impede future learning. This article outlines four counterproductive attitudes acquired from success and describes five routines that help leaders overcome these attitudes. By adopting these five routines, leaders can take action to support their learning. In addition, leaders can turn these routines into leadership strategies. These routines serve as strategies to help leaders face new challenges and overcome the counterproductive attitudes associated with successful past performance.

Bob Iger had just completed a successful run as CEO of Disney. Under Iger's leadership, Disney acquired popular entertainment industry brands such as Marvel Entertainment and Lucas Films. Iger introduced Disney+, Disney's first streaming service, to compete with companies such as HBO and Netflix. Then after 15 years at the helm, Iger appointed his successor and stepped down from the role of CEO in 2020. But his departure was short-lived. It looked more like a sabbatical than a retirement. Eleven months later, the Board of Directors asked Iger to return as CEO. The sabbatical forced Iger to reflect on his time at Disney and the lessons he learned. He realized that by the end of his first run as the leader of Disney, he had developed attitudes that left him vulnerable. He had become overconfident in his abilities and was too dismissive of the opinions of other leaders. Iger realized that he had become a victim of his success. The attitudes that helped him become one of the most admired CEOs in the world had become counterproductive later in his tenure. In his own words, Iger needed more time for self-reflection and better self-awareness; he needed to learn how to become an effective leader as he faced new challenges.

If you are reading this article, you have worked with leaders like Bob Iger who want to perform at their best. These leaders have achieved a level of success in one or two areas. Yet, they struggle to meet high expectations when faced with a new challenge. These leaders may be trying to figure out their next big challenge, or they may be new leaders who have succeeded as individual contributors and now seek to lead others. These leaders may be highly sought-after executives seeking a promotion to the C-suite. Perhaps they are leaders facing the day-to-day challenges of leading in an upended workplace. In all these situations, leaders often turn to their old playbook, the attitudes that have supported their past success. For these leaders, most of their past achievements resulted from great performance and outcomes that demonstrated their strengths. But as leaders gain more responsibility and face novel and more complex problems, these performance-focused attitudes become less effective. In these situations, leaders struggle because success requires shedding attitudes about performance and adopting learning routines.

## Attitudes that hold leaders back

Consider Jason, a composite character that illustrates why learning is necessary for thriving as a leader. Jason's promotion from top sales representative to district sales manager was bittersweet. Jason excelled at sales, enjoyed meeting with customers, felt challenged by winning over demanding clients, and thrived on problem-solving. His long hours and persistence led to consistent sales success and confidence that it would continue. He learned all the details of his product mix early on, limiting the time required to update his knowledge. But in his new job as regional manager, he no longer worked directly with customers. Instead, his day consisted mainly of reading sales reports and generating spreadsheets. The role of the district manager required him to monitor industry trends and strategize to address shifting customer demands. As a result, he felt ill-prepared for his new job, despite success in his prior position. Jason illustrates how prior experience as a top performer may be inadequate when a leader takes on a new role. Jason needed to prepare for new leadership challenges, and the lessons he learned from his prior success were counterproductive to success in his new position. Jason could no longer rely on a steady stream of successes to build confidence. In his new job, Jason needed to learn in new and different ways. Observers have long recognized that some attitudes can inhibit learning. Warren Bennis was an early management researcher who sought to uncover how leaders overcame these inhibiting attitudes. More recently, researchers and practitioners have focused on how certain attitudes can broadly support leaders in their practice and lives. A common thread is that certain attitudes gained from prior successes can be counterproductive to learning in the face of new challenges. These counterproductive attitudes are built on a foundation of performance - striving for outcomes when the need is for learning. Four attitudes acquired from past successes can be counterproductive. These attitudes include overconfidence, expectations of top performance, the desire for consistent and predictable progress, and the misperceived benefits of mental toughness.

### Overconfidence

Research conducted in various contexts supported this well-established fact: performance improves when leaders are confident about their abilities. Confidence leads to success. However, recent research has shed new light on how confidence

works. First, confidence does not necessarily predict future performance. Instead, confidence emerges from prior success. Confidence is the product of successes accumulated over time. With each successive goal achieved, confidence grows, a little at a time. Because confidence is based on past success, it may not help boost performance when a leader ventures to learn something new.

Chris Argyris wrote an influential Harvard Business Review article titled “Teaching Smart People How to Learn.” Argyris argued that smart people, who have a track record of making good decisions, are highly sought after, supported, and promoted in organizations. But this early success leads to a problem as they climb the organizational ladder. They have only been taught how to succeed. Argyris tapped into how overconfidence makes it challenging to learn. Similarly, past successes may cause leaders to take learning for granted, thereby passing up opportunities to learn and grow.

### Expectations of top performance

Another counterproductive attitude results from leaders trying to perform at their best all the time. Leaders who expect to perform at their best all the time may help achieve short-term goals, but the long-term impact is burnout and frustration. Psychologists suggested the term ‘within-person variance’ in behavior to describe how leaders, even the top performers, are likely to experience significant fluctuations in their performance throughout their careers. These fluctuations may even occur daily. Rock musician Greg Allman reflected on this concern when an interviewer asked him if he still had stage fright, even after decades of live performances. His response: I know I’m good, but stage fright is more about wondering: will I be good *tonight*? As an accomplished performer, Allman understood the idea of within-person variance intuitively. Unfortunately, many top performers always want to perform at their best. This attitude is a barrier to learning because it limits a leader’s capacity to learn from experience.

Rather than strive for consistent *top* performance, leaders should strive for consistent *good* performance. Research on professional basketball players, for example, revealed that the most highly paid players were the ones that consistently performed well, but they fell short of always performing the best. The players with high performance were prone to high- and low-performance bouts. But the consistent players were the players who achieved the most in their careers. Paul Anacone, who coached top male tennis players like Roger Federer and Pete Sampras, saw this phenomenon. His conclusion: In the long run, success is about winning even while playing average tennis. In short, the most productive leaders balance top performance with learning.

### The desire for consistent and predictable progress

A third attitude that holds successful people back in their learning is related to a learning curve. This is the attitude that progress toward goals occurs at a consistent rate. This is a misconception about the nature of the improvement process. The culprit is our beliefs about how people learn and the methods used to measure learning and performance. However, a group of researchers has questioned this view of progress.

Until recently, most research on how we learn was based on something commonly known as the learning curve. Most improvement processes have been thought to follow this predictable pattern depicted as a slowly ascending curve. But the original learning curve was based on manufacturing process improvement, not human learning. This upward trajectory in learning was called the Curtis-Wright curve, named after a company that built aircraft in the 1920s. The Curtis-Wright curve showed that over time, the number of errors in aircraft manufacturing decreased steadily as companies learned from their mistakes and introduced technology to help streamline processes and operations. Because researchers applied statistical techniques to smooth out variations across time, the result was a learning curve that looked like consistent and steady progress. But more recent research has looked specifically at how improvement occurs in people without this statistical smoothing. The result shows that many ups and downs characterize improvement. Stops and starts are common. Progress can be slow and fast. Most progress is preceded by periods of decrement—decreases in performance. In summary, when leaders assume that they will progress consistently and progressively, they set unrealistic learning expectations. Learning requires accepting the inevitable short-term setbacks and even decrements in performance associated with learning new skills.

### Misplaced mental toughness

A fourth attitude that can be counterproductive is misplaced mental toughness. Mental toughness results in perseverance, especially in facing obstacles, challenges, and setbacks. Leaders constantly hear motivational sayings about determination and ‘grit.’ Achieving goals takes self-sacrifice and even pain. The phrase ‘no pain, no gain’ was a common utterance of American Benjamin Franklin in the 1700s! But research has revealed something different. Leaders often accept the misguided belief that unwavering commitment to a course of action demonstrates their grit, and the ability to withstand unpleasant emotions while doggedly pursuing a goal. As a result, leaders often believe they must stick with a course of action, despite evidence that the actions taken could result in negative consequences. Unfortunately, leadership literature is rife with examples of leaders who learned the wrong lesson from mental toughness. But years of research across different fields show another sign of mental toughness: it is a limited resource.

Mental toughness is associated with willpower, the ability to maintain progress toward goals while enduring negative emotions. Willpower is about leaders overriding their negative or unpleasant emotions to accomplish something. In many cases, this kind of mental toughness is productive, but in other cases, this kind of mental toughness can lead to burnout and exhaustion. There is even evidence that too much mental toughness can hasten the abandonment of goals. Increasingly, research on burnout and stress has shown that, in the long run, few leaders have the stamina to suppress unpleasant emotions over extended periods without adverse consequences. Rather than focus on toughing things out, leaders need to acknowledge and accept unpleasant emotions. Leadership entails recognizing when these unpleasant emotions lead to negative consequences such as stress, burnout, and other factors detrimental to overall well-being. Instead, leaders must prioritize changing the course of action, revisiting goals, and shifting priorities. Learning requires flexibility, not just an unwavering commitment to an existing course of action.

## Learning routines: strategies to support learning

The four attitudes acquired from past success are overconfidence in success, the desire for consistently high performance, the myth of steady progress, and misplaced mental toughness. These attitudes are counterproductive to learning because they set unrealistic expectations about future performance. Said another way, performing is getting in the way of learning. Leadership Professor Michael Watkins has argued that learning is especially important when leaders transition to new roles, such as taking on a strategic role in an organization, leading a new unit, or moving into a project that requires rethinking the organizational strategy. Leaders need to shift from performing to learning in these everyday leadership situations.

Our research revealed good news. While the wrong attitudes toward learning may derail some leadership efforts, many of the leaders we studied were able to develop and implement routines that supported learning. Most leaders can continue to learn when faced with new challenges. We have conducted several studies involving over 2000 leaders from diverse industries, across different levels of the organization, and in different organizational and national cultures. These leaders were part of leadership development programs in our executive programs and consulting engagements. Some of these leaders were returning to school full or part-time in MBA and Human Resource Management programs. The leaders in our studies completed surveys, answered qualitative questions, and many participated in in-depth interviews as part of our research. In one of the studies, we tracked the learning of over 1000 employees working at a large Korean retailer. Our key finding revealed that effective leadership was crucial to learning. The more leaders supported learning, the more the team learned. Even more important, the amount of learning that occurred was directly linked to productivity and financial performance.

We also reviewed the factors leaders use to support initiating, sustaining, and increasing efforts toward learning. We reviewed over 300 studies from psychology, neuroscience, management, health sciences, education, and other disciplines to identify and categorize the factors that support learning. The factors included attitudes, behaviors, emotional states, social situations, and strategies that improve learning. Learning resulted from a complex mix of factors, not a single factor. Drawing from these evidence-based sources, theories, and studies, we identified five factors that support learning. We call these learning routines. Leaders develop routines that help them overcome the unpleasant aspects of learning while drawing on the positive aspects of past success. These routines involved being ready to learn, finding support for their learning, and engaging in behaviors and strategies that improved learning. Five learning routines support leaders as they learn to become better at leading. The five learning routines are summarized in [Table 1](#) and described below.

Table 1. Five learning routines.

---

**Generating positive emotions when facing new challenges.**

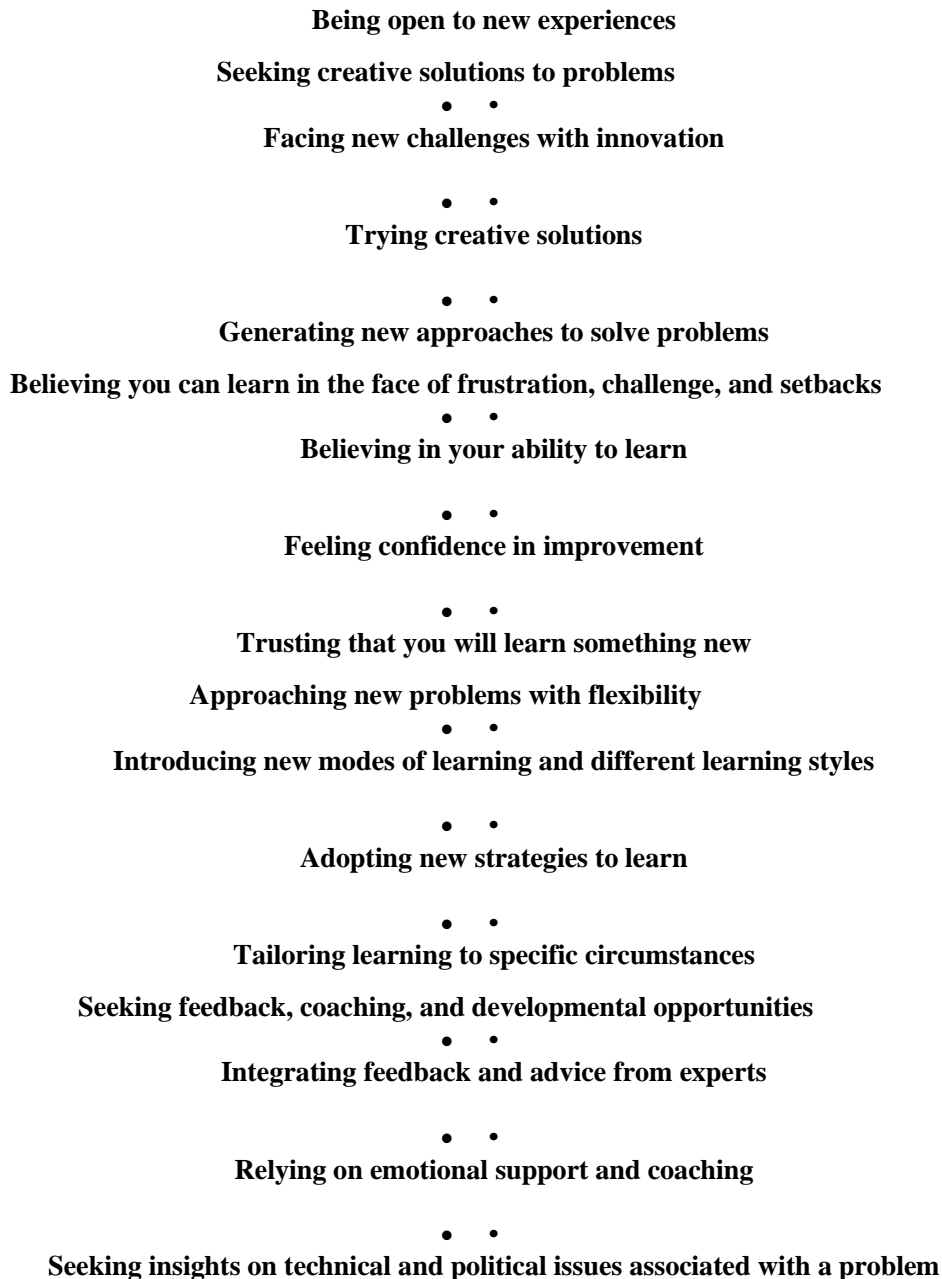
• •

**Creating excitement, being engaged and enthusiastic**

• •

**Finding ways to be curious and interested**

• •



### Generating positive emotions when facing new challenges

Positive emotions emerge when a leader is interested in an activity, is open to new experiences, and is curious. This routine increases pleasant emotions and leads to continued engagement with the activity. Consider Joan. She learned how to be curious about her new role as manager. Joan could reflect on successes and failures and say, “I just wanted the work to be interesting.” She was driven by developing new tech products and turning them into businesses, pushing the technology to new levels, and identifying new customers. She generated new experiences and was curious to see if she could succeed in novel ways. Joan was not concerned with the popular notions among the technology crowd, such as ‘learn from failure’ and ‘break things.’ Instead, she always asked the question: How do I make this new direction interesting to my team and me?

This routine surfaced from self-determination theory, optimal experience or flow, and positive psychology. When an activity is intrinsically motivating, we are more likely to learn and remain engaged in the activity. One of our studies confirmed the relationship between engaging in positive emotions and learning. We followed full- and part-time MBA students to identify the factors that supported learning during a significant life transition, like getting a graduate degree. We studied a range of psychological concepts, including social support, efficacy, and stress, and their impact on learning. We found that the most significant predictor of learning was the degree to which MBA students were open to new experiences—a dimension of positive emotional engagement. A host of studies have supported this finding. People are more likely to learn when they are open to experience, curious, and interested. Joan, like the MBAs in our study, knew that she was likely to learn when she 1) enjoyed the activity, even if it did not have clear rewards or outcomes; 2) viewed the activity as intrinsically motivating; 3) was excited to learn new aspects of the activity; and 4) was open to learning rather than just getting things done.

Generating positive emotions can come from asking questions such as: “How do I enjoy the activity?”, and “What can I do to influence the process and make it more interesting?” Leaders can find ways to keep the training interesting by engaging in positive emotions, even when bored or uninterested. They are finding some way to be curious about a topic and seeking new ways to engage. For example, try making something more complex by understanding it differently and from an alternative perspective. Alternatively, leaders can simplify the process by focusing on one specific aspect of what they are trying to learn.

### Seeking creative solutions to problems

A second routine involves seeking creative solutions to problems. Like positive engagement, seeking creative solutions focuses on seeing the positive challenges in learning. Mia, a coder, always sought new ways to improve code quality. She regularly worked with her coworkers and followed discussion boards about open-access coding. Mia challenged herself to find innovative approaches. As a business major in college, Mia’s skills as a coder were not initially as strong as those of other members of her cohort. The consulting firm that hired her put her into a team of computer science majors. She knew some Python code but was by no means an expert. She learned quickly. She learned by memorizing sequences in school, but she decided to take a more strategic view of coding in her new role. She saw how the code worked from different angles in the workplace. End users saw one thing, and coders, managers, and customers saw another. Mia quickly became one of the most valuable team members—not because she became the best coder but because she could see how different stakeholders viewed a project. She became a stand-out team member by seeking creative ways to solve problems.

The routine of seeking creative solutions to problems means finding multiple paths to improvement. Creative problem-solving happens when leaders take chances, try new approaches, and avoid becoming stuck with old ways of doing things. The critical question is: How do I explore new ways of doing things? Seeking creative solutions to problems requires taking chances, trying new approaches, and not getting stuck with old habits. Seeking creative solutions to problems draws on extensive research on skill acquisition and deliberate practice. The focus here is on mastery of skills through practice, repetition, and consistency of technique. Research in diverse fields, such as human development, creativity, and psychology, supports

the relationship between problem-solving and learning. One set of studies examined how people learn new skills and found that solving problems from different angles enhances learning. For example, participants in a study learned to shoot a basketball from a free-throw line in controlled laboratory experiments. The participants who learned to shoot from various points across the basketball floor, not just the free-throw line, learned more quickly and became better at shooting from the line. This study provides insights for leaders who want to learn. It is variability in the situation but consistency in approach that led to the most learning. By seeking creative solutions to problems, leaders activate different mental processes and introduce themselves to more complete and innovative solutions to a problem.

### Believing you can learn in the face of frustration, challenge, and setbacks

A third routine is about building an identity based on learning from frustration, challenge and setbacks. When leaders believe in their own learning, they allow themselves to make mistakes, try new approaches without fear of failure or retribution, and believe that learning is possible. The psychologist Carol Dweck has identified the importance of a learning identity in what she calls the developmental or growth mindset. An individual with a growth mindset believes in the power to improve. In contrast, an individual with a fixed mindset believes that intelligence and the requisite capabilities for success are already established. Belief in one's ability to learn is subtle; it is born from the attitude that says, "I can *learn* to be successful" versus "I *am* successful."

Learning goals are another key factor in learning identity. Goals remain an essential tool in the leadership development toolkit. Significant research focuses on performance goals and helping leaders set, pursue, and achieve new performance levels. Our experience suggests that learning goals are also essential but often less likely to be adopted by leaders. In contrast to performing goals, which focus on outcomes, learning goals shift the focus to process and help leaders identify new strategies to enhance goal achievement. One study of emerging leaders showed that learning goals, when coupled with developmental opportunities within an organization, led to the most significant increase in the development of learning competencies.

Learning identity happens when a leader believes they can learn and develop. When leaders believe they can learn new things, grow, and improve, they are more likely to succeed than if they believe they are already performing at their best. The critical question for a leader is: "Do I genuinely believe I can learn to acquire new behaviors and improve in the activity?" To activate learning identity, begin focusing on trial-and-error learning and not worry about failure. The leader should recall when they successfully learned and focus on their proven capacity to learn and grow.

### Approaching new problems with flexibility

Approaching new problems with flexibility is another learning routine. It describes how leaders remain flexible as they adapt and experiment with different strategies to accomplish their goals. Flexibility means updating an assessment of the situation, taking stock of current progress, developing new strategies, and evaluating goals and progress regularly. Unlike the overly confident leader, the flexible leader constantly asks questions about the purpose and the processes to accomplish the goal.

Flexibility implies the need for individuals to work through problems and identify, step by step, ways to continue forward.

The routine of flexibility is best understood in the context of learning theorist David Kolb's experiential learning theory. Experiential learning describes a process whereby learners resolve tensions inherent in the learning process. For example, "should I reflect or act? Should I experience something directly or learn about it from books first?" Resolving questions such as these results in learning. Flexibility helps leaders adapt strategies to accomplish their goals.

The critical question for generating flexibility is multifaceted: "Am I willing to take risks, have some failures and setbacks, and be flexible in my approach, but continue to pursue the outcome, even if it means changing direction?" To activate flexibility, develop multiple strategies and realize that many changes and adjustments must be made. Being flexible allows leaders to change direction and constantly update their situational assessment. Further, leaders can take stock of their current progress and actions to improve, change direction, develop new strategies, and evaluate their goals.

Seeking feedback, coaching, and developmental opportunities with others

Leaders quickly learn the importance of watching, listening, and working with others. This involves learning from the past mistakes of others and drawing on the accumulated knowledge of others. A successful leader will identify several potential mentors and seek feedback on their progress. Leaders can build this routine by asking: "Will I have someone to provide feedback and support?"

This routine draws on research from several areas: coaching, peer support, teams, and team leadership. Recall the study of the MBA students described earlier. In the initial design, we sought to understand the importance of social support for transitioning to graduate school. Many people in the study were managers and executives with high-paying jobs. Others were opening a new chapter in their lives by returning to school after many years in the workforce. Still others were moving worldwide to study, causing major upheaval in their lives. Yet, all the MBA students had something in common. They were seeking to improve their lives or make a significant change. We wanted to see how valuable social support was to this transition. Our research showed three essential types of social support:

- •  
Informational Support. Support for specific areas of knowledge, facts, or feedback on actions associated with business, such as calculating net-present values, applying cost-accounting rules, or knowing what types of negotiation might be necessary to solve a conflict among employees.
- •  
Social network support. Support with navigating a new culture and set of expectations to help one develop a sense of belonging to a specific group with similar interests or in similar situations. This might include understanding how to interact with other people, how to be successful engaging with teammates or working through the maze of requirements needed for work.
- •  
Emotional support. Help understand, accept, and deal with the complex emotions of taking on a major new life challenge.

Another aspect of seeking social support is turning to experienced and capable others as mentors and role models, especially those who have already accomplished what they are trying to accomplish. Leaders can activate social support by watching, listening, and working with others who have already been successful; learn from their mistakes and learn from others. Leaders ask mentors what they are doing well and how to improve. Social support can come from various sources. For example, Jan, a physician working on a self-improvement project, turned to a community running app to support her quest to train for a marathon. The app provided accountability and created a community to share successes.

## Learning routines as leadership strategies

The five learning routines help leaders learn in the face of new challenges and can serve as the foundation for leadership strategies to encourage and support these learning routines, among others. [Table 2](#): Learning routines as leadership strategies summarizes ways to use learning routines as leadership strategies. In his book *How the Mighty Fall and Why Some Companies Never Give In*, Jim Collins accounted for why some companies that have achieved great success eventually fall into severe failure. Collins argued that successful companies fail not because of the rapidly changing economic environment but because of leaders who exhibit the hubris which arises from past success. These companies become victims of a leader's undisciplined pursuit of higher performance and the denial of risk and peril. Those leaders who fail to learn when facing new or unexpected setbacks drive their organizations to decline. We believe that learning routines serve to rejuvenate organizations and help them avoid these pitfalls.

Table 2. Learning routines as leadership strategies.

---

<p><b>Leadership as generating positive emotions when facing new challenges:</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">• •</p> <p><b>Emphasize employee autonomy by giving them choice in determining how work is done.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">• •</p> <p><b>Expand employee job responsibilities to make work more meaningful.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">• •</p> <p><b>Help employees develop new skills that complement and support their work and improve their understanding of the job and opportunities for growth and development.</b></p>
<p><b>Leadership as seeking creative solutions to problems:</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">• •</p> <p><b>Challenge employees to approach problems by engaging critical thinking and improving judgment skills.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">• •</p> <p><b>Model creative problem-solving by using specific creative problem-solving techniques when working with their team on a problem.</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">• •</p> <p><b>Reinforce cross-learning where employees learn how their job and work fits into the larger picture. Specific activities include job shadowing, learning sessions with other departments, and learning multiple ways to complete work.</b></p>

---

**Leadership as building beliefs in others as learners:**

• •

**Facilitate employees with setting up learning goals where risk taking is necessary and not simply finding opportunities to demonstrate existing competencies.**

• •

**Encourage trial-and-error learning on low-stake initiatives and reflect upon failures**

• •

**Establish ‘invest in yourself day’ where employees can focus on improving skills, they see necessary for their job including regenerative activities that support well-being.**

• •

**Emphasize learning over performing such as shifting from performance reviews to learning and development check-ins.**

• •

**Conduct after-action reviews at the end of a project.**

**Leadership as approaching new problems with flexibility**

• •

**Help employees during times of change by accepting that change is difficult and supporting new ways of doing work, differences in learning, and personal challenges that might be faced at home or in the workplace.**

• •

**Create a system of tiered goals where small successes are celebrated and used as the basis for reaching stretch goals.**

• •

**Shape employee learning by having them take on new responsibilities that stretch their abilities and require them to obtain a deeper understanding of work – including understanding the historical context of their work. Encourage understanding the organization from the perspective of other units and professions such as marketing, legal, finance or accounting.**

**Leading as helping others seek feedback, coaching, and developmental opportunities**

• •

**Do the necessary mentoring and connect employees to other mentors.**

• •

**Shape a learning culture by instituting peer coaching groups where employees learn to support one another in personal and professional challenges.**

• •

**Introduce external coaches to the organization so that employees have an external source that they can turn to discuss difficult internal problems.**

• •

**Consider health and wellness initiatives including 4-hour work weeks that support work life balance and prevent burnout and lower work-related stress.**

Each of the five learning routines supports leadership in different ways. First, leadership involves generating positive emotions when facing new challenges in followers by building efficacy, engagement, and curiosity. This is done by supporting autonomy in deciding work arrangements, assignments, and methods when possible. For example, one leader we studied met with her employees weekly or

sometimes daily to identify their progress and help with any challenges they might face. Through these meetings, she was able to satisfy her own need to monitor and understand the progress. As an emerging leader, she learned to help others identify ways to motivate themselves. To engage others, she began expressing her curiosity at work and encouraged others to determine their interests. She also cultivated curiosity in others using questions: “What is interesting about this? What excites you about this project? How do you emphasize the positive attributes of this process?” These questions helped generate positive emotional engagement among her team members.

Second, leadership requires seeking creative solutions to problems by supporting junior leaders to take control of their projects. This generates creative thinking and allows more junior leaders to identify their unique approaches to working as leaders. Rather than outlining a specific method or process, leaders build and encourage others to complete tasks creatively, giving feedback and support. Remember Mia, the coder who took a strategic view of coding? Mia was tempted to tell her team how to write code for a specific project when she became a leader. After all, her years of experience offered her deep insight into writing code and the trade-offs for taking different approaches to code. But rather than telling her team what to do, she stepped back and allowed her team to learn the best problem-solving processes. She moved from chief problem-solver to chief problem-solving coach. This way, her team members were driven to develop problem-solving skills rather than depend on Mia to solve the problems for them.

Third, leadership involves building the belief that everyone can learn in the face of frustration, challenge, and setbacks. Rather than telling the team how to complete their project, leaders can take responsibility for setting the environment, and the culture, that supports creativity, learning, and autonomy. For example, one leader constantly challenged her workforce while monitoring their stress levels. Engaging employees in problem-solving was essential, but she also knew that too much challenge could lead to stress. She sought to move them to a place where they were reaching optimal experiences where a combination of challenge and skills were matched. She also performed check-ins regularly to monitor the potential for burnout. When leaders set expectations for learning and development, employees are more likely to live up to these expectations. Another example is Praditi, the local branch manager of a bank. She promoted a learning identity mindset in her branch by encouraging learning, helping team members continually seek ways to improve customer service, and making sure that when mistakes did happen, they were not ignored.

Fourth, leadership involves approaching new problems with flexibility. This often means supporting and enacting change. For example, Natasha Harrison stepped down at the famed law firm Boies-Schiller just as she was set to take the lead in the firm. Harrison felt stifled and unable to learn, grow, and take on the types of cases she desired. By starting a new firm, Harrison was able to make the changes that were not possible at a well-established firm with a distinct culture like Boies-Schiller. Leading through flexibility describes how leaders can rely on learning from their experience to engage in different learning modes and shift strategies when necessary.

In a similar situation, Justine took over as the new team leader and quickly learned that being the leader meant being flexible. Now in a formal leadership role, Justine realized not everyone would accept her ideas. Team members now saw her differently; they said she had moved to the ‘dark side.’ In other words, she was now

management. At first, Justine relied on her expertise, but she quickly learned that her knowledge had become obsolete. Others on the team knew organizational processes better than she did, and conflicts soon arose between her and her team members about the best approaches to take. Next, she tried to be a standard setter. This meant she set a goal and then sat back as her team sought to solve a problem, but the team saw her as needlessly disengaged. She also tried showing sympathy and empathy to her team members, acting more as someone who provided emotional support rather than a manager of tasks.

She tried many different approaches and, over time, realized that she needed to develop her unique style as a team leader. As she adapted to her new role, she needed to be flexible, finding different approaches at different times and learning new leadership strategies. Justine wanted her team members to become flexible too. She facilitated this skill by allowing them to take on different roles. Each team member might perform various functions on a project. For example, one team member might be a user requirements specialist on one project and then take the lead on software development in the next project. This was one way that Justine supported the development of flexibility in her team.

Fifth, leadership involves seeking feedback, coaching, and developmental opportunities with others to build social support. Remember Jan, the physician who used a coaching app to train for and complete a marathon? She adopted a similar approach to coaching and mentoring in her organization. Coaching involves helping leaders identify areas for improvement, recognizing strengths, and harvesting past experiences for lessons learned. For example, as the head pediatric physician, she adopted a mentorship program that helped connect new physicians with more experienced ones. She regularly brought in speakers to discuss emerging trends. She also created 'reverse' mentoring groups where younger physicians would describe how they experienced different topics to keep the more experienced physicians up to date on social trends so they could better communicate with their patients.

By adopting these learning routines, leaders can overcome the counterproductive attitudes they acquired from past success and engage in strategies for learning. This article outlines how leaders often learn counterproductive lessons from their prior success, but this does not mean learning stops. On the contrary, when leaders embrace learning routines, they can overcome limitations brought about by past success. Learning routines serve as the foundation for leadership strategies that leaders can enact and help them overcome the negative influences of performing. We have outlined primary learning routines that support learning from experience and demonstrated how leaders have used these learning routines as leadership strategies.

## Selected bibliography

Research on the challenges that past success creates for learning can be found in Chris Argyris, 1991, "Teaching smart people how to learn", *Harvard Business Review*, and Jim Collins, 2009, *How the Mighty Fall*, HarperCollins.

For more on the limitations of our current views on performance, see Michael C. Sturman (2003). "Searching for the inverted U-shaped relationship between time and performance: meta-analyses of the experience/performance, tenure/performance, and age/performance relationships" in the *Journal of Management*.

The basis of learning routines can be found in D. C. Kayes and J. Yoon, "Learning Routines That Build Organizational Resilience," in Ned Powley, Brianna Caza, and Arran Caza, eds., *Handbook of Organizational Resilience* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Press, 2020): 203-213. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788112215.00022> and D Christopher Kayes, Jing Tian, and Phil Wirtz, 2022: Overcoming Unpleasant Affective Experiences when Learning: A Latent Profile Analysis of Resilience. *Proceedings*, 2022, <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMBPP.2022.12198abstract> are expanded upon in Trihn, M. P. 2019. Learning identity, flexibility, and lifelong experiential learning. Oxford Research Encyclopedias. Business and Management. DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190224851.013.18.

Van Ruysseveldt, Joris, and Marius Van Dijke. "When Are Workload and Workplace Learning Opportunities Related in a Curvilinear Manner? The Moderating Role of Autonomy". *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, vol. 79, no. 2, 2011, pp. 470–483. doi:10.1016/j.jvb.2011.03.003

Reeve, C.L., & Hakel, M.D. (2000). Toward an understanding of adult intellectual development: Investigating within-individual convergence of interest and knowledge profiles. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 85(6), 897–908. DOI:10.1037/0021-9010.85.6.897

Li, F., Chen, T., Chen, N.Y., Bai, Y., & Crant, J.M. (2019). Proactive yet reflective? Materializing proactive personality into creativity through job reflective learning and activated positive affective states. *Personnel Psychology*, 73(3), 459–489. DOI:10.1111/peps.12370

Harrison, S.H., Sluss, D.M., & Ashforth, B.E. (2011). Curiosity adapted the cat: The role of trait curiosity in newcomer adaptation. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 96(1), 211–220. DOI:10.1037/a0021647

Heslin, Peter A., et al. "How Being in Learning Mode May Enable a Sustainable Career across the Lifespan". *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, vol. 117, 2020, p. 103324. DOI:10.1016/j.jvb.2019.103324