

UNLEARN AND RELEARN

Leadership Survival Skills for the 21st Century

A reporter once asked Thomas Edison: “Of all your many inventions, which one would you say is your greatest?” Edison thought for a moment and then replied: “My next one.” The quest to stay on the growing edge while living in the gap between the modern and post-modern paradigms, requires the skills of both UNLEARNING and RELEARNING. Here’s an equation that has been rattling around in my head to describe this process:

$$\text{MOTIVATION} + \text{LEARNING} - \text{UNLEARNING} = \text{GROWTH}$$

Motivation

What prompts leaders to probe new frontiers? Pain seems to be one of God’s favourite tools to loosen up our grip on entrenched mindsets. We run into brick walls. Conventional approaches just aren’t working any more. Adversity can serve as a “wedge” pushing us toward growth, but we also need a “magnet”, a positive force pulling us forward—a God-size challenge, a compelling opportunity, a fresh vision for what could be. A sense of urgency is essential to providing internal traction and readiness for change.

Learning-Unlearning-Relearning

Here are some things that have kick-started the process of learning-unlearning-relearning in my life:

1. *Gain exposure to new ways of thinking.* Leonard Sweet talks about two possible approaches to experiencing “more”. More can either mean better or different. More as *better* means doing what you’re already doing, except doing it bigger, faster, experiencing *quantitative* change. More as *different* means doing something new, unique, experiencing *qualitative* change. More as better is making the circle bigger. More as different means exchanging the circle for a triangle.

Consider the contrast between vertical and lateral learning. *Vertical* learning is the process of reinforcing what you already know, drilling the same hole deeper. *Lateral* learning requires thinking in new ways, drilling several fresh holes.

2. *Interact with angular learning guides.* Read people outside of your conventional circles. Intentionally interact with others who challenge your typical way of thinking. People who have put thorns under my mental saddle include Leonard Sweet, Brian McLaren, Reggie McNeal, Bill Easum, Thom Bandy, Erwin McManus, Alan Hirsh and Michael Frost. Leaders open to new insights need to read like they eat watermelon —shallow the good stuff and spit out the seeds.
3. *Challenge your assumptions.* Hold your convictions up to the light. Check for cracks. Distance yourself from your own cultural biases. Distinguish between principles and opinions. Scrape off extra-biblical barnacles which unconsciously attach themselves to the hull of the gospel.
4. *Push through the discomfort of unlearning.* Releasing old paradigms can feel scary--like we’re sliding down the slippery slope toward Liberalism. It takes time for the dissonance of new ways

of thinking to resonate naturally. Endure the “in-between” transition from old wine skins to new ones.

5. *Reassemble the pieces, blending the old and the new.* Many of our best insights represent a fresh way of combining new and old paradigms. Drain the bath water. Keep the baby!

The process of unlearning and relearning can be illustrated by the following stages of passing from one room to another.

