

Management Shorts #22: Learning How to Learn
How high performers succeed through continuous learning.

Written by Andrea Corney (ACorney@acorn-od.com)
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I. INTRO: A Crisis of Confidence

Stan is off to a good start on the road to professional success: Princeton, two years at a top consulting firm, and now Stanford Business School, where I am his coach in the school's Leadership Development program. **He should be brimming with confidence, but instead he is tying himself up in knots with worries about measuring up in a sea of other high achievers.** As we discuss this he reflects back on a similar situation from his days as a consultant.

"I knew I needed to speak up to show I could contribute, but I was so worried about saying something **valuable** that I often said nothing at all. I had this over active 'internal editor' that evaluated every thought I had:

- * Is it too obvious?
- * Does it add anything new that hasn't already been said?
- * Is it Insightful enough?
- * Is my wording articulate enough?
- * John has more experience than I do, so if he hasn't raised this idea, he must know something I don't.
- * If I say this will I look foolish or like a blow-hard who just likes to hear himself talk?"

Stan could get so preoccupied with this analysis that he sometimes missed half of what was going on. That added even more to the risk of speaking up—by the time an idea got past his internal editor the discussion might have moved on to other issues. If that had happened and he spoke up anyway, he risked looking like he wasn't "tracking" the conversation.

This is a pretty common issue in coaching—for young MBA's as well as for experienced managers.

As Stan and I talk about this dilemma, he tells me about a little experiment he tried in his last two months at work.

This issue of Management Shorts is a look at that experiment and the larger issue of **learning from experience**.

II. MANAGEMENT SHORT: The Experiment

Once he had his admission letter to Stanford, Stan gave two months notice at work. (This is a very typical timeline in the world of consulting.) He felt a weight lifting and realized that he was no longer worried about what his boss or co-workers thought of him. On a very practical level, he had very little to lose if he said a few things that were less than brilliant.

This realization (Stan called it a "revelation") led to a small experiment. Stan decided to focus on the work itself and not on what others thought of him. When he had a thought that could even **possibly** be helpful to the work, he would speak up rather than keep it to himself. In essence, he sent his internal editor on vacation. He figured that if the experiment failed and people thought less of him, well, it wouldn't follow him to Stanford.

By the end of the two months Stan was relieved to realize no one was looking at him funny or giving any sign that they thought less of him. In addition, he was surprised at how much fun he'd been having. Suddenly work was interesting and exciting. His energy and confidence went up. He hadn't realized how much work it had been to monitor his every comment!

On these outcomes alone he was satisfied with his experiment. But there was more.

A few days before Stan left, his boss said,

"I don't know what it is, but you've really stepped up your game in the past two months. You've had great ideas to contribute and have been adding even more value than usual to your projects. I always knew you were smart, but I didn't realize before just how sharp you were!"

A Coaching Conversation: Learning From the Experiment

I congratulate Stan on this success and ask him what conclusions he draws from the experiment.

"Well, several things. The first is that my internal editor is seriously miscalibrated! I need to send it in for repairs."

I smile along with him. "What else?"

"I think there is a Zen-like lesson here. Once I stopped trying so hard to **perform** the more my performance went up."

"What do you think that's about?"

"All that energy and mental focus that I had put on what others thought of me was now focused on my work, so I had more brain power to devote to it. Ideas came more quickly, I could work through more complex lines of reasoning, and I actually felt smarter."

"Did you sometimes say things that fell flat or led to dead ends?"

"A few times, but no one seemed to mind, and, instead of agonizing over it as I usually do, it was pretty easy to move on. Sometimes those dead ends even stimulated more creative thinking in me or in others."

"So, accepting some level of mistakes led to higher performance rather than lower performance?"

Stan nods, getting excited about this idea. "Yes! That reminds me of one of my computer science teachers saying that the only way to learn what works is to try a whole bunch of stuff that doesn't work."

Stan is looking quite pleased with himself, but I'm not done mining this experiment.

"It's clear that you over-estimated the risks of speaking up, but I think you also under-estimated the benefits."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when you started the experiment you were expecting negative reactions or increased anxiety and were happy when you didn't get either of those. The feedback from your boss was an outcome you weren't even looking for. I wonder if you even factored in that potential upside when you started the experiment."

"I think that's true. To be honest, until we started talking about it, I think all I had taken from the experience is that a situation where I have nothing to lose can be a lot of fun."

"That's the whole point of our coaching conversations. It takes focused reflection to learn from our experience. So lets see if we can extend the value of this experiment even futher."

"You mean applying the lessons to my current situation. I guess that makes sense, but other than the fact that I'm struggling to speak up more, it **feels** really different."

Different and the Same

Stan is sitting forward as he says this and he seems more tense, so I encourage him to explore this further.

"Okay. Tell me all the things that are different."

"Hmmm. I'm not sure . . . The project team meeting is a very different setting than the classroom, and even than a study group."

Consulting firms are very hierarchical, so most of the relationships I worried about were with people more senior than me. Here its one enormous peer group—there is no "pass" on an off target comment because you're the junior guy on the team. Also, I had two years at the firm to observe the accepted ways of behaving and what kinds of comments were considered valuable. I've only been at Stanford for a month and I'm still figuring all of that out."

"What else?"

"**It just feels a lot riskier.** I had nothing to lose in my last two months at work. But everyone says how important it is to build strong relationships at business school and how those relationships will be important throughout your career. Its already clear to me that I **don't** want to be seen as one of those people who talk too much or speak without thinking. I feel like I have a lot to lose."

"You're right, there is some risk, but if you continue on the path you are on, each step will take you into new situations to navigate, with increasing levels of risk. If you take the time now to develop the skill of conducting and learning from experiments, you're much more likely to succeed at any challenge that comes your way."

Learning How to Learn

Stan sits back in his chair.

"This isn't **just** about whether or not I speak up in class is it?"

"No, it isn't. It's about learning how to learn from your own experience."

"I think I get what you're saying, but could you humor me and spell it out a little more?"

"Sure. A lot of the functional things you are learning in business school have 'right' answers or tools and techniques that will work the same for anyone who uses them. But when it comes to anything behavioral—leadership, team dynamics, presentations, negotiation—what 'works' is going to vary with the situation and

with the person. So you have to learn what works for you **and** how to modify that for different situations."

"So that's where the experimenting comes in?"

"Yes. There are other ways to learn such as reading, observing others, and introspection, but none of these are as powerful as your own experience."

"I guess, but does it have to be so risky?"

Managing Risk

"That's a good point. The level of risk in your current situation is a little bit higher than it was during your last two months at work. What if you were to try a similar experiment here, but modify it to lower the risk?"

"I'm not sure what that would look like."

"Think of it as moving 15% beyond your comfort zone. I'm talking about relative risk, not absolute risk. In the last two months at work you had so little to lose that you could turn your internal editor completely off without feeling too anxious. It was still moving beyond your usual behavior, so felt a little risky, but wasn't a major risk. In your current situation, it might feel just as risky—and provide just as much learning—to simply turn down your internal editor."

"Interesting concept. But I'm a little stuck on the 15% part. How do I measure something like that?"

"Its not about precise measurements. Its just a way to help make the idea of risk taking seem manageable. You have to take some risk to grow, but you don't have to take all or nothing risks. I've found that thinking of it this way makes it easier to come up with concrete things to try. So, what would a 15% stretch look like for you in your current situation?"

Stan takes a moment to think about this.

"I'm used to thinking of this as all or nothing, not gradations on a scale. Based on what I've been doing in my first month here, I guess 15% would be speaking up in class at least twice a week and in my study group at least three times a session. That's more than I'm doing now and I feel a **little** nervous thinking about that, but it also feels do-able and I'm pretty goal oriented, so setting a number makes me want to hit the mark."

Data: The Other Half of the Experiment

We have one more aspect of the experiment to look at.

"Every experiment requires data on your results. What was your data in the first experiment?"

"What I was most focused on was **how other people reacted** to me. Mostly it was watching their faces when I spoke up, and also noticing whether or not my ideas got picked up on. Seeing my ideas in the final client report was pretty satisfying."

"You had two other sources of data."

"There was the **feedback from my boss**. That was pretty unexpected and it was more specific than just observing other's reactions. I wouldn't have gotten as much out of the experiment without that."

"Exactly. It was just lucky that you got that feedback. How could you 'design' some feedback into this experiment?"

"I suppose I could ask the professor for feedback, but that feels really nerdy and what I really care about is how my peers see me."

"Okay. You already have a few close friends here. Could you ask one or two to pay attention to what you say in class and give you feedback afterwards?"

"Doesn't that make me look lame?"

"It might if you asked the whole class, but I'm talking about one or two people that you **already have some trust with**. Plus, I guarantee you that almost everyone in your class is concerned about how they are showing up here. You could offer to be 'feedback buddies' and give them feedback on whatever issue they are working on."

"I still think it's a little lame, but not more than 15% outside that 'comfort zone' you were talking about."

This makes me laugh out loud.

"Touche."

"What I like about it though is that it makes it a little less risky. If I'm starting to head off track they'll tell me and I can turn my internal editor back up and any damage I've done will be minimal."

"Great. You've got **observations** of how people react when you speak up. You've got **feedback** from one or two classmates after you've spoken up in class or in your study groups. You had **one more source of data** in your work experiment."

"I did? What's that?"

"**You've got your own reactions when you try something new**. Remember you noticed how much more fun you were having at work? You felt sharper and less anxious. We haven't talked about it, but you probably had an internal dialogue going on much of the time. All of that is worth noticing."

"Are we talking about **feelings**?"

"Sorry, it's unavoidable if you really want to learn from your own experience. But it can include your thoughts as well. Just noticing the moments when you think of something to say and then choose not to is worth noticing. Just remember that your reactions are neither good nor bad, they're just data. **No matter what happens, you're going to learn something.**"

"I guess that's the point, isn't it?"

I nod and then wait for a minute. Stan is thinking through something. He finally speaks.

"You've walked me through all the steps and it all seems reasonable, but I've still been feeling resistant. Then I remembered the first part of the conversation when you talked about over-estimating the risks and under-estimating the costs."

Now it's my turn to look puzzled, so Stan connects the dots for me.

"At the consulting firm I didn't suddenly get smarter. All that changed was my **perception** of the risk. I could have tried the experiment earlier and gotten two years of high performance instead of just two months."

"Ah! A little reflection goes a long way."

III. GETTING STARTED: Learning From Your Experience

As the coaching discussion above illustrates, small experiments can yield big rewards. If you've ever worked in Sales on a new product, you've probably seen this in action. At the end of the week the sales team will meet and share what happened on their sales call.

"What did we learn?"

"What worked?"

"What didn't work?"

"What can we try next week?"

(And if you have children, you're probably very familiar with the concept of a "learning opportunity".)

What did you learn this week?

What can you try next week?

Not sure? Give me a call to schedule your own coaching conversation.

IV. UPDATE: Upcoming Speaking and Training Engagements

Coaching the Coach

In addition to coaching first year students like Stan, I also serve as a "Master Coach" for second year students who are learning to be effective coaches. I'm now delighted to report that I am taking this work beyond Stanford to [Pacific Community Ventures](#) (PCV), a non-profit organization that manages two for-profit investment funds, and offers entrepreneurs access to valuable business development resources through various programs and services. In partnership with PCV I have developed a half-day workshop for their volunteer advisors on **how to build effective advising relationships**. In November we launched the workshop in the Bay Area and on January 28th we'll offer the first workshop in LA.

SUN Microsystems

On February 2nd I'll be speaking at SUN on **Emotional Intelligence and Professional Success** as part of a professional development series for employees.

Forum For Women Entrepreneurs (FWE) CEO Forum

On February 11th, I'll be the subject matter expert for the bi-monthly [CEO Forum](#). The subjects will be "building corporate culture" and "performance management".

If your organization is looking for a speaker, you can find my speaking resume on the [Company](#) page of my website.

Until next time . . .

Warm regards,
Andrea

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