

# LEARNING TO LEARN: THE KEY TO LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

*James W. Keyes*

The quest for effective leadership skills is unending. Throughout history, we have sought the quick fix for leadership, trying everything from servant leadership to leadership by walking around. Leadership is most often a capability honed over many years by learning through experience. This process does not need to take an entire career, but instead can be accelerated by proactively learning to learn. Much of leadership, of course, begins with self-awareness. Therefore, before we can learn to lead, we must learn to learn. We must learn ourselves, and in turn, learn the meta skills that will allow more effective interaction with the world around us.

I have tried to capture the importance of learning to learn in my recent book *Education is Freedom: The Future Is In Your Hands*, from which this article is adapted. I address the “what,” “how,” and “why” of learning. The inspiration and even the title stems from a nonprofit that I founded called The Education is

Freedom Foundation, while Chief Executive Officer/CEO of 7-Eleven, Inc. Throughout my professional career serving as CEO of two Fortune 500 companies, 7-Eleven and Blockbuster, I grew to appreciate the critical importance of education to the individual, the corporation, and to humanity at large.

Working from a belief that shareholder value and social good are not mutually exclusive, I set out to find a way to demonstrate a return on investment from philanthropic dollars. That effort was targeted at the most important resource for most corporations, an educated workforce. We decided to grow our own future employees by working with public school systems to provide young people with a roadmap to success.

My work with the nonprofit demonstrated that our fundamental learning skills, most of which were introduced in our early lives, are too often forgotten or overlooked in a fast-paced world that encourages a

focus on technical skills. In many technical fields such as engineering or accounting, one's skills can often be applied in a static environment. Leadership skills, in contrast, must be applied in a dynamic environment that requires a constant adaptation to change. It is our response to change that will separate leaders from followers, or even success versus failure.

So how does one condense a career's worth of learning into a roadmap to leadership success?

It is not enough to say that one must "learn" to be an effective leader. Instead, I have tried to capture "what" learnings were necessary, "how" to make leadership a dynamic learning process, and "why" continued learning is such a fundamental requirement for effective leadership. I have distilled the what, how, and why of my leadership education into 9 principles I call the "C-Suite Learnings"... Let's examine those "C-Suite" learnings and their origin.

Shortly after being named CEO for the first time, I woke up from a dream with an interesting revelation. The weight of responsibility from my new role likely triggered the dream, but it was so powerful and vivid that it caused me to write down three words: Change, Confidence, and Clarity. In the dream I was to have been given a "gift" for solving three challenges.

The next day, I asked a few friends to help me interpret this vivid dream. I could not understand how these three words could have translated into a gift, but to my friends, it was a simple translation. "Your success to date," they said, "is due to those three gifts. You have the gift of change. Your ability to embrace change has helped you deal with adversity and turn it into opportunity. Your gift of confidence allowed you to believe that anything is possible with diligence and hard work."

They continued: "Finally, your gift of clarity is what makes it all possible. You can break down difficult problems into simple solutions and then communicate those solutions in a way that even a child could understand. Those are the things that make you a leader and have contributed to your personal and professional success." This interpretation floored me. They were right. Everything I had ever accomplished in

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life, from grammar school until my ascent to corporate leadership, came down to those three essential elements.

Not only did I embrace these gifts, but I also began to teach them, and I have used them as a leadership guide for my employees, teammates, and friends. I have found these three keys especially relevant to leadership of all types. Before we even begin to learn, we must discard the obstacles to our own development. The ability to adapt to change, the confidence to do something about it, and the clarity to see through the darkness to the light beyond are all things we must learn to do before we can begin our true learning journey.

Each of these three areas of **WHAT to LEARN** will contribute to leadership success.

### **Change**

I have a favorite expression, appropriate for anyone who wants to be CEO of a company or even CEO of their own life: Change Equals Opportunity. Virtually all forms of leadership require a response to change and the effectiveness of any leader will depend on their ability to adapt. Adaptation to change is an endless cycle that propels individuals, companies, and civilization to advance. Unfortunately, not all change is good. Whether crisis, or innovation, many of us have an adverse reaction to change. We get comfortable with the status quo. Acceptance of change and the ability to respond in a positive, proactive fashion is often our greatest leadership challenge, but also the single biggest opportunity for an individual or an organization.

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# *Change Equals Opportunity.*

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Adversity does not define the individual, but one's response to adversity does.

## Confidence

We all suffer from insecurity, making us weak and often unable to achieve our highest potential. Fear and insecurity lead to ignorance and failure. We see the power of fear in our lives every day. The news is full of scary things. War, crime, disease, and the economy are all topics that can generate fear and concern. In the hands of those with a motive or agenda, fear can be weaponized. It is a powerful tool to motivate or manipulate.

We are all vulnerable to this influence, but the most powerful antidote is knowledge. What makes a child fear the dark? The unknown. Turn on the light, and their fear disappears once they realize no monster is in the room. Knowledge is that shining light for any issue. Uncovering the root cause, and determining the true nature of the risk is the best way to eliminate fear or at least to diagnose the validity or urgency of any given threat. Turning ignorance into a learning experience gives us a better chance of turning inertia into opportunity.

Knowledge is the best antidote to fear, because armed with information, confidence can prevail within anyone. How does one develop confidence? A dear friend, bestselling author Harvey Mackay, shared this advice; "Prepare to Win." Those three words, he said, make all the difference. Preparation breeds confidence, and confidence breeds success. With preparation, we can enter any situation, any game, or any boardroom with confidence. The lack of preparation, in turn,

will lead to uncertainty and fear. Often, that fear is driven by a natural fear of failure. To overcome the pervasive fear of failure that holds many of us back, I have adopted a favorite quote from Nelson Mandela: "I never lose. I either win or learn."

## Clarity

The ability to turn complex problems into understandable parts that can lead to simple solutions is the art of clarity. Achieving simplicity is a difficult task for most people, but it is essential to moving forward. The fundamental prerequisite for clarity is effective communication, both inbound communication (listening) and outbound communication (speaking). As a leader, we are often expected to have all of the answers. Too often, we are preparing a response before even hearing another's point of view.

The successful entrepreneur Mark Cuban describes a lesson he learned at a young age. Knowing his propensity to speak before listening, he developed a habit of writing "listen" on his notepad before entering any meeting. Inbound comprehension is an absolute prerequisite to an informed response. Whether inbound listening or outbound speaking, we must be able to communicate simply and effectively. Einstein described true genius as the ability to make complex ideas simple, not making simple ideas complex. If a leader is not able to accomplish this, then they will find that their direction is difficult, if not impossible, to follow. In the words of Leonardo da Vinci, "Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication."

The ability to adapt to change, the confidence to do something about it, and the clarity to see through the darkness to the light beyond are all things we must learn to do before we can begin our true learning journey. Once we master these elements of "what" to learn, we can then focus on developing a better understand of "how" to learn. In leadership, as in life, we sometimes take learning for granted. We often forget, or overlook the basic skills that brought us to where we are today. As children, our primary school education taught the fundamentals of critical thinking, of curiosity, and the importance of creativity,

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## *I like to consider critical thinking as the algebra of thought.*

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things that came naturally to us. The basic formula for learning has not really changed since the beginning of time. Our mind is capable of critical thinking, but that skill often goes unexercised. Driving critical thinking is our native curiosity that makes us look around and wonder “why.” Sprinkle in some creativity, and we are ready to have fun while learning.

Each of these areas of **HOW to LEARN** can also contribute to leadership success.

### Critical Thinking

The ability to discern fact from fiction is a fundamental part of our learning process. I like to consider critical thinking as the algebra of thought, because it is the process of breaking down problems into their components and solving them based on the available data. Only then can we determine what is true or false, enabling us to make the best decision with the information available. Today, with the explosion of information through technology, it is exponentially more important for us to examine and understand the “why” of any reported information. Socrates was a master of inquiry. Before debating his opponent, he would delve into the reasoning behind their point of view. Only then could he better address an issue after examining both sides of the argument.

Another fundamental tool of critical thinking is the scientific method. The simple process of developing a hypothesis, taking an action based on that hypothesis, and measuring the result; a “plan, do, see” approach, will allow us to use data and results to create a process

of continual improvement. While commonplace in the lab, this scientific method approach is equally applicable to organizational decisions. A leader adept with critical thinking will use such processes to make more informed decisions with greater success.

### Curiosity

Intellectual curiosity is the root of all knowledge. Curious learners are proactive and always asking questions. Other, more reactive learners, remember only information they find relevant. An essential element to developing solutions is proactive curiosity, the ability to explore and to constantly seek knowledge. The more curious we are, the more we will traverse life in a meaningful and connected way. Curiosity is the lifeblood of all innovation.

A company’s ability to differentiate will depend heavily on the curiosity of its product development team, constantly seeing new ways to satisfy the customer. Ultimately, a company’s ability to nurture that culture of intellectual curiosity will depend on the tone at the top. If leadership is curious and nurtures a culture of innovation and exploration, then the organization will follow. Curiosity is the jet fuel of learning and the inspiration behind effective leadership.

### Creativity

We are all born creative. As children, however, our natural creativity expressed in song, dance, or perhaps crayon art on the wall may have been discouraged. Even if not discouraged, these skills are often forgotten as we progress in our specialized careers. For success, it is

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essential to nurture creativity. We can all develop our creative skills, if only given the chance and encouraged to do so. Any form of creativity will help to activate our right brain skills. In very subtle ways, it will contribute to our ability to think outside of the box. The creative mind also allows for greater freedom to think without being encumbered by predisposed rules and boundaries, very simply, to have fun! In fact, Albert Einstein defined creativity as “intelligence having fun.”

The **WHAT** and **HOW** of learning are internally focused, based on “self” and our ability to manage our internal motivations. The **WHY** causes us to turn outwards to consider the way we look at others and the way they perceive us. Few of us live in isolation, on the proverbial desert island without a need to interact with others. Instead, we live in a world of unique people, places, and cultures that can help us grow as individuals and allow us to succeed collectively as a society. This makes the **WHYs** of leadership perhaps the most important of all.

Leadership is often considered to be a skill. We are “trained” to be leaders. We learn to create strategy, to communicate those plans and to provide direction. Leadership learning is different from more technical learning processes. Leadership learning is more about life, growth, and humanity. Recognizing that we are not alone in this world, I have outlined three elements that make up the why: collaboration because we live in a community both locally and globally, cultural literacy because understanding and adapting from other cultures can expand our own horizons, and character because that is the identity that will shape the way we interact with others.

Understanding **WHY to LEARN** is perhaps the most important step in our Leadership journey.

## Collaboration

The idea that two minds are better than one holds true, but collaboration is often elusive for individuals because of the constant tension between individual interests and the good of the whole. Throughout our academic journey, we are mostly individual performers. I recall the first true experience with collaboration coming

during business school, when forced to work with others on a case study. I was appalled at the idea of my grade being dependent upon the skills of total strangers, until I discovered that one member of our case study group was a Certified Public Accountant/CPA and the case study was focused on an accounting problem to solve.

I now respected the power of collaboration to bring people of different backgrounds together for a better end product. Our unique skills came together to produce an A on the case. The key to collaboration is the ability to share a common goal or objective. Collaboration and cooperation require putting one’s individual interest second to the interests of the group, a learning that only comes from a belief that one plus one equals three with the power of collaboration.

## Cultural Literacy

The ability to understand, respect, and learn from other cultures will ultimately contribute to the cumulative learning that makes us “who” we are. We have a choice as individuals, to reflect the small group of individuals of our immediate circle (family, community, or even country) or to become a reflection of the cultural influences that contribute to the collective character of humanity.

I was raised in an environment void of cultural literacy. Growing up in humble surroundings, there was little diversity of race or religion in my small New England town. My only exposure to ethnicity was between Irish or Italians with the only religions represented being Protestant and Catholic. Poverty has a way of sheltering us, but also can make us ignorant of the cultural richness the world has to offer. My own cultural literacy was born of a year of study in the UK. Even in this English-speaking country, I found myself to be a minority. It took a full semester to learn the various cultures from Indian to Pakistani to the uniqueness of my friends from Ireland versus Scotland. Understanding their respective cultures helped my assimilation process, ultimately leading to my election as “senior student” for the second semester. This would be the same as a “Head Resident Assistant” as we would call it in the US. This was an incredible and somewhat



unheard of honor for a “Yank.” The learnings from this experience served me well when doing business around the world. I was thankful that, at an early age, I was able to learn that the more we learn from other cultures, the richer our own existence can be.

## Character

Integrity, the ability to develop intellectual honesty and trust among others is integral to successful leadership. If we are not honest with ourselves, we cannot be honest with others. Honesty requires an open mind, a willingness to accept divergent points of view, and enough humility to know that we always have more to learn. Martin Luther King, Jr. encouraged us all to judge each other by our character, not by the color of our skin. Our character is ultimately the identity that we hold out for ourselves and for others.

The character traits of humility, compassion, civility, and integrity are all components of our personal brand. In other words, they represent the image that we present to our team and to the outside world.

## Conclusion

Together these are nine critical success factors that I have called the C-Suite Learnings, the very steps that enabled my journey through various leadership roles in business. They also represent critical success factors that all leaders must learn to succeed. This C-Suite Learning is a valuable road map to help you form a path to your own learning journey.

The purpose of this article is to emphasize that there is no quick fix leadership lesson that can make someone an overnight success. Leadership is about adaptation, the ability to respond to change, and self-awareness. Ultimately, it is about constant, lifelong learning. We must continue to learn because the only certainty that we will face as leaders is the certainty of change occurring and the necessity of our leadership practices to respond and adapt to those changes. That is why learning to lead is the prerequisite to all leadership.

My goal is to help others find their own path to academic, professional, and even personal success. By

practicing these nine Cs, we can Live to Learn; freeing ourselves from personal and societal constraints that limit our success. Only then will we truly Learn to Live; and in turn Learn to Lead.

This article is adapted from the book *Education is Freedom: The Future Is In Your Hands*, by James W. Keyes (Savio Republic, 2024).

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