

The Leadership**Impact** Newsletter

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I received word this week that my latest book, *Partnership of Equals: Practical Strategies for Healthcare CEOs and Their Boards* is now available from ACHE / Health Administration Press and Amazon.

Now that that the publication process has been completed, I am moving my next writing project into higher gear. I have a new book in process I am tentatively calling *Making Your Experience Matter*. The book is intended for all managers, not just those in healthcare

My goal is to help managers increase their ability to lead, to solve problems, and to act effectively by becoming lifelong learners. I have organized the book into 10 chapter clusters: Managing, Measuring, Asking Questions, Hypothesis Testing, Listening, Modeling, Empathy, Values, Applications, and Confidence. At the most basic level in each cluster is a foundation chapter, followed by a next steps chapter that addresses the core issues from a slightly higher level of development. I then consider the most common problem that is likely to block or limit learning within the cluster. An accelerators chapter comes next. This is a lesson designed to significantly improve the rate of learning for leadership performance. The culminating chapter for each cluster I refer to as mastery level. This is a learning behavior that exemplifies a very high level of self-awareness, insight, and commitment to growth.

I will be posting chapter drafts on my website each week to create the opportunity for us to interact while the book is still in process. You will get the benefit of an early look at a new approach to leadership development, and I will get the benefit of your comments and suggestions for improvements. Try it out.

Making Your Experience Matter

"A man who carries a cat by the tail learns something he can learn in no other way." – Mark Twain

There are stories everywhere. One day I was walking on the street towards my office when a colleague stopped me. He asked if I could give him a bit of help on a speech he was preparing. "You seem to have a story for every occasion," he said. "And I need a story to illustrate a point. Can I use one of yours?"

He was right about the stories. I do have a lot of them. But what is characteristic about them is that they are most often about ordinary experiences of life. They are seldom unique. I reminded him of that and suggested that in his own life, he was as likely as me to have had experiences that would illustrate the important points in his speech. If he used the lessons from his own experiences, I observed, they would not only make good speech components but even more importantly he could use them himself as building blocks in his work.

Many people rely on the advice of outside experts, and as a consultant, I am happy to be called upon for assistance. There is a richer source of valuable insights, however: looking inside and extracting the lessons of your own personal history. For years, I have worked with leaders to help them tune into their own stories. When relevant, I share my personal experiences and the guidance I have derived for making choices and taking action, and I encourage them to do likewise. My leadership and life experiences are not unusual, so my lessons often apply broadly, but the practice of personal reflection and growth is what is more important for me to share.

Leaders need the broadest array of resources upon which to call. Evidence-based best practices may exist in some cases. Sometimes there are experts who have deep knowledge or specialized tools. Often, however, leaders will encounter situations where there is no obvious right way to proceed. In those instances, they must reach inside and use the accumulated wisdom of a lifetime of experiences to correctly assess the situation, identify options, evaluate pros and cons, and exercise judgment to make good decisions and take action. Lifelong learners have an advantage because they have much more experience on which to call.

Contrast such leaders to others who are less alert and less reflective. Those who are self-satisfied and complacent about learning are prone to repeat errors. They get mired in the old formulas and old solutions for old problems. Those who are certain that they already have the right answers don't ask good questions, so they remain unaware of the true circumstances in which they find themselves and are unable to adjust flexibly to change. They display insecurity and defensiveness about alternative approaches and tend to surround themselves with like-minded people. When you encounter people like this, you realize that their experience has conveyed little benefit. They fit the classic pattern of the individual who has not gained 25 years of experience but rather has repeated one year of experience 25 times.

"Learn from the lessons of your own experience." - McGinn's Law #5

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Making Your Experience Matter - Continued

“Only people who die very young, learn all they really need to know in kindergarten.”
- Wendy Kaminer

In writing about making your experience matter, I am reminded of Robert Fulghum's *All I Really Need To Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. When he published his “credo,” it became a staple of forwarded emails, and later his book spent many months at the top of the bestseller lists. He connected with millions of people because his lessons were so simple but we could recognize something much more in them. Here's how the list started:
“Share everything.”
“Play fair.”
“Don't hit people.”

What was so compelling about those lessons is that people could not only identify with the childhood experiences but also readily apply them to adult situations.

Another author, Wendy Kaminer, later commented, “Only people who die very young, learn all they really need to know in kindergarten.”

I laugh when I think about that – because I actually agree with both of them. Am I just displaying the normal human tendency to overlook inconsistencies in my own beliefs and thinking? Or perhaps as a psychologist or as a former CEO, have I had too much practice reconciling differences between people and finding common ground to build on? Actually, in the case of Fulghum and Kaminer, I think they are in agreement with each other at a deep level, and it is only on the surface where the conflict seems to exist.

Kaminer is saying to us, in effect: *Hold on, folks. Let's not be childish and naïve. The world is very complex. We have adult issues to contend with, and we need to exercise adult thinking and judgment.* I can't argue with that. New challenges arise all the time. We cannot hope to deal effectively with them if we stop growing and stop learning.

But I don't think Robert Fulghum would disagree either. He never proposed or even hinted that we should stop learning. The beauty of his simple list, and the reason so many people resonate to it, is that he demonstrates how we as adults should take our earlier experiences and look to them for insights and lessons as we encounter even greater challenges. I think both he and Kaminer advocate lifelong learning. As do I.

Voltaire said, “Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is absurd.” Voltaire was a philosopher and a rebel. Perhaps he could manage without certainty, but what about the rest of us? Is certainty absurd for us, too?

From Robert Fulghum: *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*

- **Share everything.**
- **Play fair.**
- **Don't hit people.**
- **Put things back where you found them.**
- **Clean up your own mess.**
- **Don't take things that aren't yours.**
- **Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody.**
- **Wash your hands before you eat.**
- **Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the Styrofoam cup - they all die. So do we.**
- **And then remember the Dick-and-Jane books and the first word you learned - the biggest word of all - LOOK.**

Certainties are neither good nor bad in and of themselves. It is how you identify and manage them that is important for your ability to learn from experience.

Test yourself. Are you ready to look a bit more deeply into areas that normally go unquestioned by you? If so, it is time to open up and engage in real dialogue with a coach or some trusted friends and colleagues. In the case of certainty, you might ask yourself questions like: *Why do I feel so strongly about this? Why do I react so strongly whenever someone raises a contrary point of view on this topic? Why am I so certain that this is the way it must be?*

You may be satisfied with your answers. If, however, you identify some certainties that now seem habitual, shallow, or outdated, you have prepared yourself for more learning from experience.

Through this process, you are likely to discover that some of your certainties are well founded and are core to your sense of self and who you want to be. You can build on those even more deliberately and productively. Others, however, are likely to be revealed as either inconsequential and non-essential or as harmful and counterproductive. You will want to clear them out to make room for new learning and for the certainties that are important and life affirming for you. It is vital for you to be able manage your degrees of certainty and uncertainty.

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