



Good Leaders Never Stop Learning

By Susannah Sagan and Rob France

As a pair of nonprofit leaders with more than 50 years of combined experience, we have learned that the single most important thing a leader can do to enhance their career is to keep learning.

This may sound counterintuitive, because being a leader assumes you already know things. But being an active learner doesn't negate or lessen your credibility as a boss. In fact, it boosts it. As we've [discovered](#), learning is the essential fuel of an effective executive.

As campus professionals who have impacted the lives of thousands of young adults, we intrinsically know the value of learning and are often called upon to teach. In fact, we often find ourselves in meetings or programs with others, making the case to commit to a regular practice of learning, citing the benefits.

So, we took our own advice and removed our "teacher" hats and regularly became students and ultimately became better leaders.

Here's seven reasons why you as a leader should do the same, even if you think you don't have time.

- **Model Learning Values For Your Organization:** If, like [Hillel](#), your organization lists learning as a value, you as the leader need to embody that value. We can't preach to everyone else and not do it ourselves. When we model that we are too busy to learn, we send a message to our team that learning is not a priority – and subconsciously communicate that learning is not a requisite to success. Even with all the other benefits of learning, the biggest one is that our staff and colleagues are watching.
- **Expand Your Ideas and Skills:** As leaders of organizations, our jobs tend to have broad responsibilities that require broad skill sets. But we can't be experts in everything. One person cannot be simultaneously strong at vision setting, supervising, development, budgeting, and all the other attendant skills needed

from a senior leader. Learning strengthens areas that aren't natural tendencies or existing skills.

- **Stop Getting Stuck:** We work in an ever-changing environment that demands adaptive, not rigid, leadership. The challenges we face are fast moving and rarely have a clear right or wrong answer. A learning mindset helps us balance competing factors, weigh pros and cons, and imagine unintended consequences of our decisions. Learning is also often hard work. We try to understand our own reactions and we try to understand what others are trying to teach us – all of which keeps us open to new ideas and encourages us to be flexible.
- **Practice Humility:** As leaders, we often exude high confidence. As learners, we acknowledge that we don't have all the answers. And, some questions don't even have answers. By staying off balance through learning, we are constantly reminded of our limitations, which keeps us from becoming arrogant.
- **Find New Ways to Think:** It's easy to get caught up in the day-to-day machinations of our work, which makes it difficult to think big and boldly. When we learn, we often encounter new ideas or better ones. Learning exposes us to a wide range of ideas and helps us build up new methods of approaching challenges. We have been continually surprised how a piece of religious text or a biblical story can help us understand and solve a contemporary problem.
- **Improve Communication:** Sometimes it's difficult in the workplace to visualize or internalize a rule or expected behavior. For example, in our organization, we are expected to provide "radical hospitality" to the thousands of students and community members we engage on campus each year. Studying the many ways that biblical patriarch Abraham welcomes strangers to his tent gives us a common frame of reference for the notion of hospitality and a shared visual language for all the ways a new person can be welcomed. By learning this story together, we can share a common library of metaphors.
- **Create New Connections:** The Jewish faith has a long custom of learning in pairs, *Chavruta* style, meaning "friend" in Hebrew. "As the head of any organization, particularly a Jewish organization, it's so important to take the time to continue to learn. Torah is at the core of what we do, who we are. For me, it's been important to continue to learn Torah, to take the time to study Torah and to do it in *chavruta* [small group setting]," says Dana Tumpowsky, executive director of Hillel for Utah.

The reasons for this are clear. To avoid being stuck in one's head, it helps to be challenged and supported by someone else. Other benefits for studying with a partner

include accountability – having a peer who can push us out of our comfort zone and keep us motivated.

Who you chose to learn with is also important. Learning with a client or customer can help deepen your relationship; learning with a board member can give new insights into how you each approach a problem; and learning with a direct report can teach many lessons in leadership.

As a leader, know that you're not only entitled to learn but that learning will make you a better leader. Now, go find a partner, pick something to learn, and your career will reap the benefits.

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