

Hyper-Learning

What's in it for me? Become a hyper-learner to prepare for the future.

When humans moved from the African rainforests onto the open savannah thousands of years ago, they had to adapt rapidly. The very survival of our species depended on huge leaps of learning. Now we face a very different challenge, though no less dramatic. We're confronted with enormous technological change and the threat of losing our jobs to machines. To continue to flourish, we must become what the author calls "hyper-learners." In these blinks, you'll learn what that means for you on a personal level – how your ego and your busy mind affect your ability to learn. You'll also see how a modern corporation can implement a hyper-learning mindset, with collaboration and psychological safety at its core. In these blinks, you'll learn

that mindfulness is important to learning; why getting granular can help you become more efficient; and how a long-established insurance company transformed itself.

To become a hyper-learner, you first need to quiet your ego.

Picture a mid-morning work presentation. You're listening to a colleague explain a new idea while standing in front of a whiteboard. After a while, she turns to the room and asks if anyone has any questions. You ask one, challenging her idea. Then, politely and carefully, your colleague explains why you're mistaken. But rather than listening to her answer, all you hear is her disagreeing with you. Inside, you feel embarrassed – even a little angry at being shown up in front of your teammates. What's happening here? Rather than entering into the debate objectively, and accepting that you might be wrong, you've let your ego get the better of you. That's no way to learn. The key message here is: To become a hyper-learner, you first need to quiet your ego. Our egos often get in the way of any real learning. They convince us that we're always correct – that our way of seeing the world is the right way. When our egos are wounded, we respond negatively. We shut down and act irrationally – even when, deep down, we know we might be wrong. So the first step to becoming a strong learner is quieting the ego. It's only when we can look at the world with humility, without our ego clamoring for attention, that we can see things clearly. Let's go back to the example of the work presentation, and consider a different approach. Rather than feeling irritated when your point is challenged, take some time to listen to the other person's perspective and reflect on it. Ask her how she came to her conclusion and compare it to your own reasoning. Then, in a spirit of collaboration, calmly agree or disagree. But whatever you do, don't identify with your ideas. You are not your ideas. The whole point of honest debate is to discover a better idea – together. Freeing yourself from your ego requires you to redefine your identity. Maybe you've earned a PhD, or others have labeled you as "smart." While you can be proud of your accomplishments, viewing yourself as the best won't help you see the world from a new or contrasting perspective. Instead of resting on your past achievements, you should learn to define yourself by the quality of your thinking, listening, relating and collaborating. It's only then that you'll truly be able to learn.

Mindfulness meditation helps you prepare for learning.

Just as a big ego can get in the way of learning, so can a busy mind. Imagine that you're sitting in a lecture. But rather than hearing the lecturer's words, you're thinking about when the lecture will end. And that social media post you read earlier in the morning. And you're also wondering what the other students think of you. Obviously, you're not going to be absorbing much of the lecture. To do that, you need an empty, clear, focused mind. This is where mindfulness meditation comes in. Here's the key message: Mindfulness meditation helps you prepare for learning. Mindfulness meditation is a powerful tool to help you focus. By calmly and intentionally directing your attention to the present moment, you'll quiet your busy mind and open yourself to learning. William James, who is often considered the father of American psychology, said that "Voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character and will." That's what mindfulness does in a nutshell – it teaches you how to get control over your mind. So how exactly do you meditate mindfully? Start by focusing on nothing but your breath for two or three minutes at a time. At first, you may struggle. Your inner voice will start chattering again and you'll have to refocus your attention on your breath. But after a week, you might be able to focus for five minutes at a time. And after a couple of months, you may reach up to twenty

minutes. Now, imagine being able to drop into a work meeting or strategy talk with a beautifully calm, empty mind that just listens. Wouldn't that be something? Meditation has other benefits, too. In fact, meditating can help you regulate your emotions, make you less defensive, and even improve your body language by making you super aware of subtle body movements. All of these things are crucial to the open communication that hyper-learning requires.

There are two key mindsets that are integral to hyper-learning.

To become a hyper-learner, it's likely that you'll have to adapt your behavior. That might mean learning to become a better, more reflective listener, or improving your focusing skills. But before you change your behavior, you'll need to change your mindset. Your mindset is something that is deeply ingrained – it determines how you act and think about any number of things. To become a hyper-learner, you'll need to adopt not one, but two types of mindsets. The key message is this: There are two key mindsets that are integral to hyper-learning. The first mindset to adopt is the growth mindset. This concept stems from the work of American psychologist and Stanford professor Carol Dweck. According to Dweck, if you believe that intelligence is innate and fixed from the moment you are born, then you have a fixed mindset. This kind of mindset limits your motivation and ability to learn. After all, if you think that you can't improve and grow beyond the abilities you were born with, why would you bother trying? On the other hand, those with a growth mindset believe that ability is not fixed at birth. Dweck claims that having a growth mindset motivates you to keep learning and persevering, as you know that you can always improve. This idea of a growth mindset is also backed up by modern science. The human brain has plasticity – in other words, it can be reshaped by what we do. And this means that we can keep growing and learning new skills and behaviors. The second mindset to adopt is what the author calls a NewSmart mindset. This means rethinking the very idea of what it means to be smart. Exam results are often only a guide to how good you are at retaining knowledge. But having a NewSmart mindset means that you're focused on innovation and creativity. Those with a NewSmart mindset aren't afraid of making mistakes, either – in fact, they view them as critical to learning. They also embrace open-mindedness and listening, setting ego aside to collaborate with other people. Those with a NewSmart mindset are confident that the best ideas emerge from teamwork, not from solitary thinkers. In the next blink, we'll move from mindset to behavior, as we dig down into what it really means to be a hyper-learner.

Becoming a hyper-learner is behavioral.

After you've considered the kind of mindset required to become a hyper-learner, you'll need to change your behavior. It's not enough simply to believe that you want to change; you need to demonstrate it, too. That's how you turn abstract ambition into action – and it encompasses everything from small gestures to the kind of language you use. The key message here is: Becoming a hyper-learner is behavioral. The first thing to do is identify the behaviors of a hyper-learner. Going on what we've learned already, a list of these behaviors might include open-mindedness, embracing uncertainty, humility, and effective collaboration. All of these behavioral traits are fundamental to grasping complex concepts, new technologies, and future opportunities. Behavior is what we do, hour after hour, day after day. To incorporate a new behavior means thinking about what it entails and how you can implement it. It's not as easy as saying, "I will be a great collaborator." You need to get to the heart of what that means; you need to get granular. So let's take the example of "effective collaboration." What does that mean on a granular level? Well, we could say that effective collaborators are good listeners. But what exactly makes a good listener? We know that good listeners don't interrupt other people and they ask relevant questions to clarify what they've just heard. These are specific traits that a hyper-learner can adopt to become a great collaborator. Then, to nail effective collaboration down even further, we could look at what ineffective collaboration might entail. On a granular level, we could say that interrupting people before they've finished speaking is a sure sign of ineffective collaboration. Not only is identifying these granular traits important when clarifying hyper-learner behaviors, it's also vital for measuring your progress and holding yourself accountable. Without objective confirmation of your behavior, you won't know if you're making headway or falling behind.

The story of W. R. Berkley shows how a company can adopt hyper-learning at its core.

The insurance corporation W. R. Berkley has a long and venerable history. It was founded in 1967 by William R. Berkley when he was a student at Harvard Business School; today, William is the executive chairman, while his son, Rob, is president and CEO. Throughout its existence, the company has prided itself on its people-centric

culture, which it believes to be key to its success. However, in recent years, leaders at the company realized that in order to stay relevant and flourish in the future, they needed to adopt a hyper-learning mindset. Here's the key message: The story of W. R. Berkley shows how a company can adopt hyper-learning at its core. So how exactly did W. R. Berkley implement a hyper-learning culture? First, members of the leadership team recognized that every employee had to play an important role in the future of the business. They grasped one of the key pillars of hyper-learning: the best ideas come from open, healthy collaboration, not from a single leader dictating the direction of the company.

R. Berkley's leaders also knew that the best environment for continuous, company-wide learning was one in which everyone felt psychologically safe. This meant removing the top-down approach so often used in workplaces. Employees were encouraged to question and critique ideas, even from their managers.

The leadership team also understood that embracing change and innovation involves mistakes, so they encouraged a company-wide culture in which it was OK to mess up. They fostered an environment in which trying something new and inventive, and then failing, was always better than not trying at all. In the words of CEO Rob Berkley, "There are no failed initiatives, there are no failed experiments." Underpinning this hyper-learning culture was a necessity. The company knew that if they didn't implement these changes, then they'd be left behind. In a world where many of our abilities will eventually be better executed by machines, those who don't harness innovation and constant learning will fade away. Even a well-established company like W. R. Berkley would become a footnote in American corporate history. But rather than let this happen, the company transformed itself. Through consultations and workshops that involved employees at all levels of the company, W. R. Berkley embedded hyper-learning at its core, and came together to face the future.

Organizations of the future should adopt four key concepts.

It's simple: businesses that stick to the old way of doing things won't succeed in the future. Those who foster a culture of individualistic competition, top-down leadership, and fear of failure will just fade into obscurity. As well as being unpleasant and soulless places to work, those kinds of organizations just don't foster learning and innovation. If you're scared of your boss or of losing your job, you're never going to take the risks necessary to think outside of the box. A new way of working is needed. And that begins with four key concepts. The key message is this: Organizations of the future should adopt four key concepts. The first of these concepts is an idea meritocracy. This is the model that Google uses – and what better recommendation is there than that? In an idea meritocracy, the best ideas or judgments always win out. And it doesn't matter where the idea comes from – from a first-week recruit or the CEO. Positional rank or power means nothing in this system. The second concept is positivity. Research by leading psychologists such as Alice Isen and Barbara Fredrickson has shown that positive emotions enhance our mental capacity. Whether we're dealing with cognitive processing, innovative thinking, decision-making, or creativity, positive emotions can enable us to perform better. And – you guessed it – negative emotions do the exact opposite. Fear and anxiety can actively suppress performance. So it follows that the workplaces of the future should create positive, people-centric cultures. The third concept here is psychological safety. According to Harvard Business School professor and psychological safety expert Amy Edmondson, it's an essential part of learning within any organization. Employees should be able to express themselves without fear. And they should feel safe from things like social ostracism, being passed over for good assignments, or being fired on bogus grounds. Without psychological safety, people are often too afraid to be courageous and experiment. And lastly, there's self-determination. Self-determination – that is, the tendency to seek out new challenges and expand your capabilities on your own – is another vital part of the puzzle. If employees feel like they have autonomy at work, they're more likely to be highly engaged and perform at the highest levels. On the other hand, if self-determination isn't part of an organization, then employees will be less motivated and more likely to underperform.

The key concepts of hyper-learning have already been central to many great thinkers, scientists, and leaders.

While fads and fashions pass, certain ideas persist. This is what wisdom is – what lasts. Whether it's having a quiet ego or an open mind, many of the ideas relevant to hyper-learning have been a cornerstone to the thinking of many brilliant minds. Take Albert Einstein. He believed that imagination was more important than knowing. In other words, to make new discoveries, you can't rely on what you know already; you have to be imaginative and think outside of the box. You have to keep starting over again. Einstein considered intelligence to be determined

by one's ability to change continually. The key message here is: The key concepts of hyper-learning have already been central to many great thinkers, scientists, and leaders. Then there's William James, the father of American psychology mentioned earlier. He considered the wisest among us to be people who've learned to think with an open mind, letting go of past beliefs and experiences. Doesn't that sound familiar? He also observed that we find it hard to process anything that contradicts our previously established view of the world. In his words, "Objects which violate our established habits of 'apperception' are simply not taken account of at all." When it comes to hyper-learning, it's crucial that we learn to do the opposite. Next, there's Warren Bennis, who pioneered leadership studies. Bennis understood that the most effective leaders treat people as valued collaborators, not as underlings. He also believed that the only competence essential for leadership is "adaptive capacity" – a key component of hyper-learning. Another thing: he stated that true learning begins with unlearning. To see the world from a fresh perspective, we need to unlearn what we know about it. Finally, there's Charlie Munger, vice-chairman at Berkshire Hathaway and a successful investor. His personal philosophy is to become a little wiser every day, by cultivating curiosity and continuous reading across a range of subjects. By his estimation, he has never known a wise person who didn't read all the time – "none, zero." From Nobel laureates to leading investors, all of these people have come to similar conclusions about what inspires innovative thinking. And all of them, in their own way, were hyper-learners.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: To become an effective learner, you need to squash your ego and get to a serene state of mind. Mindfulness meditation can help get you there. Adopting a growth mindset will encourage you to improve continuously. And a NewSmart mindset will help you rethink what "smart" really means. Finally, to adapt to a changing future and remain relevant, modern organizations must learn to value collaborative, company-wide learning. Actionable advice: Stay fit to be a better learner. Our bodies and minds are intricately connected. If there's an imbalance with our physical health, our mental capabilities will also suffer. So make time for your daily walk, jog, or aerobics routine! Got feedback? We'd love to hear what you think about our content! Just drop an email to with Hyper-Learning as the subject line, and share your thoughts!