

Learn from People, *Not* Classes

Whom do you know, and what can they teach you?



Reid Hoffman

Cofounder, LinkedIn

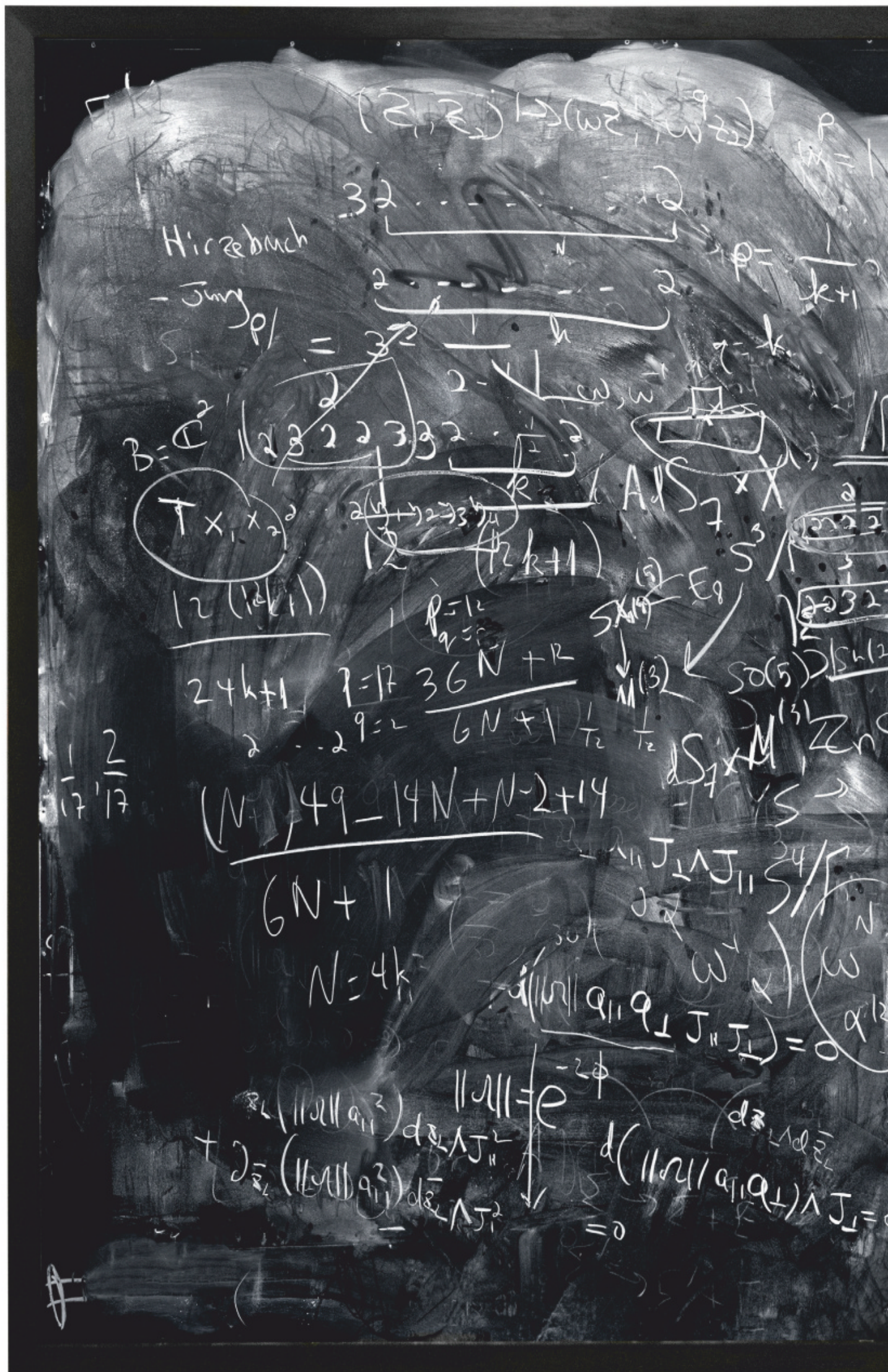
Chris Yeh

Entrepreneur

Ben Casnocha

Founder and partner, Village Global

OVER THE PAST two decades the internet has reshaped our daily lives and the world of business—so it’s not surprising that it’s transforming how companies develop talent. The emergence of a “personal learning cloud” makes it convenient and affordable for people to access new ways to learn. And that’s a necessity: To keep pace with change and avoid disruption, business leaders must become what we call *infinite learners*—those who not only enjoy learning but feel a constant need to acquire new skills. The leaders and disrupters we meet in Silicon Valley and around the world are distinguished by the speed at which they zip up the learning curve. Regardless of age or industry, infinite learners are different from those who



Harvard I

become terrified when suddenly required to learn something new—they find the challenge exhilarating.

Among the executives we meet, however, very little of this learning takes place in formal classes or programs, including online ones. Even as courses go virtual, executive education will struggle to keep pace if a company's environment is constantly changing. Picking courses out of a catalog won't provide the tools needed to adapt. We have interviewed many dozens of successful entrepreneurs and executives over the years, for our books and our podcasts, and we can't recall any who said that an executive education class played a vital role in their success.

The most successful leaders we know learn in a different way: by tapping into what we call *network intelligence*.

Consider how Reid solved a major business issue at PayPal by drawing on the knowledge of his network. At the time, PayPal was suffering seemingly endless delays in the launch of PayPal Japan. Each week its attorneys would find new regulatory issues that prolonged the process. Reid called eight friends with good connections in Japan and asked whom they knew who might be able to help. Three mentioned the same name: Joi Ito, a venture capitalist and entrepreneur. One introduction later, Reid was talking with him about the situation. Ito found a consultant who obtained a letter from the Japanese financial services agency stating that PayPal could launch its service immediately so long as the site wasn't in Japanese; English-language websites weren't legally considered to be operating in Japan. PayPal Japan debuted shortly thereafter, and Reid and Joi—who now directs the MIT Media Lab—struck up a friendship and collaboration that is still going strong.

Granted, it's usually easier to build a learning network if you're employed by a well-known firm, have a broad existing network, or have something

in your background that will incline people to respond to your request. But it's worth the effort, given the potential of learning via one-on-one conversation. In that setting people often offer observations they might not share in a large group, online, or in writing. And because learning via conversation is driven by your questions, the lessons are delivered at your level. It also requires that you do your homework—there's no lurking passively in the (literal or virtual) back row.

Here's another instance of the power of one-on-one learning. When Brian Chesky, a true infinite learner, was scaling up Airbnb, he sought advice from people such as Warren Buffett. "If you find the right source, you don't have to read everything," Chesky told the class we teach at Stanford. "I've had to learn to seek out the experts. I wanted to learn about safety, so I went to George Tenet, the ex-head of the CIA."

Still, the world is full of experts who lack boldface names. "Talk with other entrepreneurs, not just famous entrepreneurs," the Dropbox cofounder Drew Houston told Reid on the *Masters of Scale* podcast. "Look for people who are one year, two years, five years ahead of you. You [will] learn very different and important things."


Online courses can be highly useful in some cases, especially for learning a specific technical skill (such as coding) or a managerial task (such as conducting a performance review) that's so ubiquitous that it rarely requires customization. Chris's teenage son takes online courses to develop his computer animation and video game design skills and finds them highly convenient and

effective—he can learn on demand, without leaving his bedroom. This kind of online learning belongs in any leader's tool kit.

But it's smart to consider formal classes to be *a* source, not *the* source, of learning. Two decades ago Bill Gates wrote, "The most meaningful way to differentiate your company from your competition, the best way to put distance between you and the crowd, is to do an outstanding job with information. *How you gather, manage, and use information will determine whether you win or lose.*" This could not be truer today—but the way we've been socialized to think about information and knowledge is insufficient. Our formal education system treats knowledge as a fixed asset acquired during a certain phase of life. In reality, knowledge is constantly changing, and good leaders never stop acquiring and assimilating it.

In the Networked Age, every day is exam day—full of new, unpredictable challenges. Often the best way to learn how to meet them is to talk to people who have faced similar situations. All you need to do is ask. ☺

HBR Reprint R1902B

 **REID HOFFMAN** is a cofounder of LinkedIn and a partner at the venture capital firm Greylock Partners. (Disclosure: His podcast, *Masters of Scale*, is produced by WaitWhat, which is currently developing projects with HBR's parent company, Harvard Business Publishing.) **CHRIS YEH** is an entrepreneur, a writer, and a speaker. **BEN CASNOCHA** is a founder and partner at Village Global, a venture capital fund. Hoffman and Yeh are the coauthors of *Blitzscaling* (Currency, 2018).