



Book Learn Like a Leader

Today's Top Leaders Share Their Learning Journeys

Marshall Goldsmith, Beverly Kaye and Ken Shelton
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Recommendation

The Learning Network (TLN) is an organization of management and organization authorities, development experts and learning leaders. TLN asked 100 thought leaders – among them Jim Collins and Warren Bennis – to describe their most notable learning experiences. From these accounts, editors Marshall Goldsmith, Beverly Kaye and Ken Shelton assembled an inspiring collection of 35 “learning journeys,” divided into eight sections. Each narrative is a gripping personal story and provides excellent material for unexpected learning. *BooksInShort* recommends this compilation to those seeking to build their capacities for learning and leadership.

Take-Aways

- Top leaders’ individual “learning journeys” communicate memorable lessons.
- Elizabeth Pinchot: Stand up for what you believe.
- Frederick Hudson: Chart and follow your own course.
- Richard J. Leidet: Get rid of the unnecessary.
- Warren Bennis: Know your abilities and trust your own opinions.
- Jim Collins: Have a “to-learn list.”
- Peter Block: Connect to your courage.
- Charles Garfield: Seize positivity.
- Jay Conger: Live every moment.
- Stratford Sherman: Be willing to change.

Summary

To Live Is to Learn

People learn best through experience, and experience creates stories that must be told. Each story concludes with a question to help you apply the tale to your own experiences. These invaluable lessons emerge:

- To be a great leader, first, lead yourself. You will learn best when you live your life in a meaningful, effective way.
- The paths you choose make all the difference.
- The best students are the best teachers.

- You can't understand or improve your life if you don't "step back" and gain perspective.
- Life is a gamble, so take chances to get ahead.
- Learning often requires unlearning. You need an open mind to quest for knowledge.
- The more it hurts, the more you learn.
- Mentors can open your eyes.

“Developing Self-Knowledge”

Elizabeth Pinchot, co-founder of the Bainbridge Graduate Institute, recounts her five years at an “experimental ecological farm.” During this period, Pinchot attended a lecture by E.F. Schumacher, author of the popular book *Small Is Beautiful*. Pinchot sat next to Margaret Mead, the great and formative cultural anthropologist, who died later that year. Mead was sleeping in her chair, wrapped in a navy blue cape, her grey hair the only evidence that the cape held a person.

“Everyone’s life is filled with experiences, whether they are traumatic, rewarding, frustrating or humiliating. All of these can be sources of valuable learning.”

Pinchot recognized the sleeping Mead and was excited to be next to her. However, Pinchot gave her attention to Schumacher, who spoke in a wise, gentle manner. Pinchot agreed with Schumacher, and was annoyed during the question-and-answer session when a woman dressed in designer finery did her best to debunk his speech. The stupidity of the woman’s comments and her air of presumed authority aggravated Pinchot. However, as a young woman in a room of “real grown-ups,” Pinchot did not challenge the obnoxious woman.

“Everyone has a spark of greatness that needs to be given the opportunity to burn.”

As the woman continued to hog the floor and pester Schumacher, a frustrated and angry Pinchot uttered a hostile remark under her breath. She immediately felt a sharp jabbing elbow in the ribs “from the dark-cloaked lump sleeping” in the next chair. Margaret Mead whispered: “Stand up and say your piece.” Inspired, Pinchot did. She will never forget Mead elbowing her to urge her to speak her mind. Years later, Pinchot knows that she still needs occasional prompting.

“We have to find ways to do what is intrinsically rewarding every day of our lives.”

Ask: How can you get those who are not like you to listen to what you have to say?

“Pain Is a Great Teacher”

Change expert Frederic Hudson contracted polio at age 9 in 1943. He suffered complete paralysis and feared he might die in the hospital. Susan, his nurse, assured Hudson that he would not. Her message: “Your future, Frederic, is hidden in the ceiling, and you are the only one who can find it.” She told him that he could become anything he wanted. All he had to do, according to Susan, was “study the ceiling. When you see your future, it will start to happen.” Filled with hope, Frederic peered at the magic ceiling. He imagined a positive and happy future.

“To be authentic is...to discover your native energies and desires, and then to find your own way of acting on them.”

Eventually, he began to regain feeling in his toes. Susan promised him that his body would come back to him – his feet, then his legs, then his backbone, then his arms, and finally his neck and head. “You are now in training,” Susan told him. She explained that he must constantly practice moving his body. She worked hard to help educate him, explaining that he could become anything that he wanted to be. Before entering the hospital, Hudson had been a mediocre student. Thanks to Susan, he became an avid learner. He regained his health and never forgot Susan’s dictum: “Take responsibility for your life course.” Frederic earned his doctorate at Columbia. In 1987, he started The Hudson Institute of Santa Barbara, a training and coaching center.

“Resolution of conflict comes from people being able to express their own feelings and their own needs in the face of another.”

Ask: What do you see in the ceiling for your future?

“Mentors Matter”

Richard J. Leider, founder and chairman of The Inventure Group, a coaching company, leads annual “walking safaris” in Tanzania, East Africa. On one of Leider’s first trips, Koyie, a Masai chief, guided the expedition. Leider had not worked with Koyie, and the chief had never worked with such a group. Leider carried a heavy pack filled with “camping ‘necessities’.” Koyie carried nothing. At their destination, Leider was relieved to finally unload his burden. Koyie, perplexed, asked to see what was so important that Leider had to carry it along. Leider needed 10 minutes to unpack everything and explain all the items. Koyie asked Leider: “Dick, does all this make you happy?”

“Who you are is everything.”

Koyie’s query went directly to “the heart of [Leider’s] deepest values.” Why was he carrying around all this stuff? Leider understood that he didn’t need it. He gave half his belongings to the local villagers. Leider also realized that he had been carrying unnecessary baggage throughout his life. He vowed to reduce his burdens, and he did.

“My great teachers talk about concepts such as love, trust, vulnerability, empathy and authenticity.”

Ask: How can you lighten the unnecessary burdens you carry?

“Lessons on Leadership”

Warren Bennis is a distinguished professor of business administration at the University of Southern California. As a young boy, Bennis was sullen, friendless and withdrawn. One day, his teacher asked the students to give a 10-minute presentation on their favorite hobbies. Bennis panicked. He had no hobby. He was, however, a terrific shoe shiner. Bennis taught his classmates how to make shoes gleam like glass.

“The issue is not with the other person or people. The issue is usually in me.”

Bennis’s knowledge and passion for shoe shining fascinated his classmates and his teacher. Afterward, he says, “a new Warren Bennis was born.” From this epiphany, he learned the value of forming one’s own opinions – the key to creating a “personal identity.” He believes in the necessity of reinvention – “to ‘compose a life,’ as Mary Catherine Bateson puts it.”

“Always be inclusive.”

Ask: How would you describe your personal abilities?

“The Learning Executive”

Jim Collins is the author of *Good to Great* and *Built to Last*. After giving an interview to a television producer preparing a documentary about Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart, Collins turned the tables and asked his interviewer what she had learned about Walton. The producer was surprised when her subject began to interview her. But investigating what other people know and can tell you is among the best ways to learn. According to Collins, executives and professionals mistakenly focus on performance rather than learning. Author John W. Gardner sums up Collins’s philosophy on learning: “Don’t set out in life to be an interesting person; set out to be an interested person.”

“Never stop experimenting.”

Ask: In addition to your “to-do” list, do you have a “to-learn” list?

“Crossroads and Choices”

Peter Block, a leadership consultant and author of *The Empowered Manager*, marks three watershed moments that dramatically changed his life. The first came from participating in Gestalt workshops where Block learned the importance of expressing his personal experience – who he was, not what he wanted to achieve. The second occurred when he read *Inner Game of Tennis* by Tim Gallwey. The book teaches that awareness “is the antidote to self-doubt and self-judgment.” It posits that each person possesses the intuitive wisdom to answer the questions he or she confronts. The third moment came during a lecture on “purpose, destiny, aloneness and mortality,” by philosophy professor Peter Koestenbaum, who explained that everyone must grapple with these substantial issues. When it comes to destiny, choose “greatness and purpose.” Your life matters; make it count.

“Share your learning journeys to make a difference.”

Ask: What courage do you need in your life today?

“The Dancing Toll Taker”

Dr. Charles Garfield wrote the popular Peak Performance books. He recalls an incident in 1984 when he pulled up to one of the 17 tollbooths at the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Bridge. Rock music blared from the booth, and the attendant was dancing. “What are you doing?” Garfield asked. “I’m having a party,” the man said. “What about the rest of these people?” Garfield said, gesturing toward the other 16 tollbooth attendants. “They’re not invited,” the dancer replied.

“Truly effective people learn from all of life, and apply their lessons to keep growing.”

Intrigued, Garfield later asked the tollbooth dancer about his philosophy. The man explained that tollbooths are “vertical coffins.” He said that the other tollbooth attendants enter these coffins every morning at 8:30 and then “die for eight hours.” But not him. “I’m going to be a dancer someday,” he said. “My bosses are...paying for my training.” Instead of being deadened by boredom, the dancer seized all possible positivity from his situation. The dancing tollbooth attendant achieved “a zone of peak performance,” by aligning his personal objective – to become a dancer – with his job. Through his positive attitude, the tollbooth attendant attained an enviable “place of personal power.”

“The power of storytelling cannot be denied.”

Ask: How can you seize positivity today?

“Seeing Yourself as Others Do”

Jay Conger teaches organizational behavior at the London Business School. When he was a 19-year-old anthropology student, Conger spent a summer in the ancient Turkish city of Aphrodisias. He supervised Turkish workmen as they dug through 2,000 years of rubble to uncover the city’s original Roman theater. Once a major metropolis of 300,000, Aphrodisias devolved over time into the site of insignificant Byzantine villages and, eventually, small Islamic settlements.

As his team dug down into the levels of village rubble, sifting through the debris of ancient times, Conger was struck by the insignificance of humankind’s memorials. In antiquity, the wealthiest individuals in Aphrodisias commissioned stonecutters to inscribe their names on marble monuments. Future generations erected new monuments atop these older artifacts, which eventually disintegrated into rubble. This process was repeated throughout the centuries. Conger imagined that one day a thousand years in the future, some young archaeologist would supervise a dig to uncover the artifacts that depicted where and when Conger lived. Life is fleeting; don’t waste it.

Ask: What can you do to make this day the best that it can be, for you and the people you love?

“Unlearning What You Thought Was So”

Leadership authority Stratford Sherman serves on the national advisory board of the Peter Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management. His father, a Holocaust survivor, taught Sherman that personal strength depended on being an unchanging, unmovable boulder in a roaring river. Sherman internalized this lesson. It served him well until he started to date Meredith, now his wife.

Before they wed, Sherman and Meredith had numerous ups and downs because of Sherman’s inflexible nature. But Sherman loved Meredith, and he knew that if he couldn’t adapt and change, he would lose her. So he became more flexible and pledged himself to Meredith. He says, “My adulthood began with the decision to commit to change.” As an expert on “large-scale organizational change,” Sherman believes that “organizational transformation” depends on “individual acts of voluntary commitment.”

Ask: Are you willing to change if change is necessary?

About the Authors

Marshall Goldsmith is a management and leadership development expert. **Beverly Kaye** is an authority on career counseling. **Ken Shelton** is CEO of Executive Excellence.
