

TAKEAWAYS

- › True learning is evidenced by changed behavior and adaptation.
- › Learn-how becomes as important as know-how.
- › New learning literally reshapes the structure of the brain.
- › The brain feeds on novelty.

A Strategy
for Adaptive
Change and
Self-Renewal

Learning *with* **INTENT**

By Frank Benest, ICMA-CM

As we—the seasoned managers who have been on the job for a number of years—gain age and experience, we often conclude that we have little left to learn. We develop a blasé attitude about learning. Earlier in our careers, we often experienced great leaps in learning through new work assignments, reading, conferences, and coaching. Now we may find little new to discover.



Why Learning?

True learning is evidenced by changed behavior and adaptation. Learning is especially critical for local government managers because we lead organizations facing accelerating and discontinuous change.

Local governments are overwhelmed with the service and fiscal consequences of demographic shifts, a tax system not coordinated with our service and knowledge economy, technological innovations, escalating demands by everyone, unsustainable costs, and environmental stewardship challenges. Moreover, citizens lack confidence in all institutions, including government, at the very point that we need strong institutions to address our challenges.

To exacerbate matters, most local government structures, processes, and practices are tied to the static world. Now we are being forced to change. Forced change can be traumatic for organizations, employees, and community members. With ongoing organizational flux and restructuring, local governments need flexible and ever-learning employees.

In this disruptive world, technical knowledge becomes quickly obsolete. Learn-how becomes as important as know-how. Learning agility is the ability to take on a new challenge, do research, try out some ideas, and fix up things as we go along. For both line employees and managers, learning agility becomes the key competency.

As management consultant Gary Hamel asks, “Are we learning as fast as the world is changing?”

It is difficult, even depleting, to be a leader in turbulent times. Learning is critical to self-renewal and to staying energized while grappling with new realities.

Learning and Life Phases

Frederick M. Hudson, author of *The Adult Years: Mastering the Art of Self-Renewal*, identifies three key phases of adult development:

Dream and plan. During this phase, we dream, anticipate, and plan for developing our careers and starting our families. We experience great leaps of learning as we continue with formal education, begin our careers, and encounter new situations.

Plateau. In the plateau phase, there is much learning as we take on leadership challenges and confront adversity. The work is difficult but there is contribution and joy. Everything seems to be aligned and clicking.

Doldrums. In the doldrums, there is “little wind left in the sails.” We experience the “been there, done that” blues and find that we are not learning much either through our day-to-day work or structured learning (reading, conferences, seminars). In the doldrums, we have three choices.

- Do nothing (and things get worse).
- Make a mini transition (take on new learning, get energized through a new passion project).

- Make a major life transition (retire and move on to a new life phase, develop an encore career, find a new life partner).

Learning with Intent

The ICMA Credentialing Advisory Board promotes learning with intent, in other words, becoming more purposeful in our learning. This kind of learning can help managers adapt to the disruptive world and can help us refresh and renew ourselves. Learning with intent encourages us to:

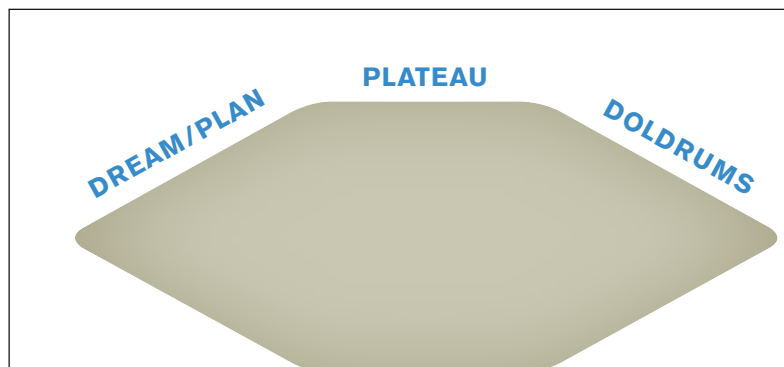
- Consciously seek out new experiences and learning.
- Explore ways to apply new ideas.
- Reflect on one’s practice.
- Share insights with others, be open to their perspectives, and together build on lessons learned.

Midlife Stagnation

People can stagnate at any age, but the doldrums are more likely at midlife. According to gerontologist Alex Comfort, at midlife, psychosocial—as opposed to biological—factors account for 75 percent of the limitations to learning. Our mind-sets and habits can limit our learning.

Given our success and professional stature as managers, for example, we may fear the mistakes

Frederick Hudson’s Life Phases



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and setbacks that are keys to learning and adaptation. As we age, we sometimes also believe that:

- Learning and creativity are for young people.
- We have seen everything.
- We are too old to learn “new tricks.”
- Our brains are losing cells.
- Our memory is getting much worse.

To learn with intent, we obviously need to challenge these mind-sets.

Experience Compared with Structured Learning

Some managers see a dichotomy between on-the-job experience and classroom education and argue that work experience is the better teacher. This is a false dichotomy. Structured learning—reading, research, classes, and conferences—helps create a conceptual framework for new behavior and adaptation but does not change behavior. Experience by itself also does not necessarily lead to true learning, better performance, or adaptation to changing realities. The keys to both are *reflection* and *application*.

For maximum value, structured learning must be augmented by reflection about the content and the application of knowledge to practice. Likewise, to maximize the value of work experience, one must reflect on what happened, what went well and not so well, and what kind of lessons can be applied to new practice.

The best experiences tend to be stretching job assignments coupled with personal reflection, debriefing with others, and candid, helpful feedback and coaching. Structured learning works best when one reflects, shares insights with others, and applies the concepts to work.

In both cases, the sweet spot for applying new learning is when we stretch ourselves and have a 50 to 70 percent chance of success. If less than 50 percent, the experience can be overwhelming, and we tend to withdraw. If more than 70 percent, the assignment does not stretch us enough.

Growth Mind-sets

Carol S. Dweck, in her book *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, contrasts fixed versus growth mind-sets. Those with fixed mind-sets believe that one’s talents are fixed, that the capacity to learn and grow is limited, and that failures are to be avoided. Those with fixed mind-sets typically do the same things over and over to reinforce their sense of competency.

Those with growth mind-sets believe that talent grows with effort, and they treat challenges and even failures as opportunities for learning and acquiring new skills.

By consciously learning with intent, including coaching, we can move beyond fixed mind-sets and promote growth attitudes.

Brain Research

Brain research suggests that we do not lose brain cells as we age. The key issue is the tens of thousands of synapses that are the connections between brain cells. Over time, we experience synaptic pruning. The brain creates well-worn grooves or pathways that each individual uses the most. Other pathways or connections wither if they are not used.

The good news from neurological research is that there is still brain plasticity as we age. New learning creates new synapses and pathways in the brain. As

we adapt to changing demands, new learning literally reshapes the structure of the brain.

Neuroscience also suggests that memory circuits in the brain are not merely for reflecting on the past but are also vital mechanisms for imagining, anticipating, and preparing for the future. The proactive brain helps us integrate the past with new experiences so we can better navigate the future.

Learning Strategies

To learn with intent and nurture new pathways and a proactive brain, we can turn to a variety of strategies:

Give your brain a rich and diverse bank of experiences.

New experiences (for example, interim management assignments, shadowing a frontline employee, new relationships, learning another language, travel or work abroad, volunteering with a free clinic) plus new structured learning (such as reading and classes outside the profession) provide richer information to our brains so we can better adapt and even help create the future. The brain feeds on novelty. Shaking things up helps create new pathways.

Reflect on structured learning or work experiences.

Quiet, uninterrupted time allows the brain to wander, recombine prior experiences, and make connections.

Share experiences and reflect with others.

By sharing learning, others can help us reflect, make connections, and anticipate the demands of the future. We can also learn by borrowing from the experiences of others.

Think about the future. By reflecting on our values, hopes, and dreams, we can identify and help shape future scenarios for ourselves and our organizations.

Apply new learning by testing new ideas.

To stretch and grow, we need to test new ideas, reflect on what we learn, and incorporate the new learning into practice.

To minimize the risk of failure in the risk-averse political environments of local government, we can tell everyone, including the governing board, that we have initiated a pilot from which we will learn from mistakes.

Debrief everything. As learning leaders, we can encourage everyone to debrief important and not-so-important experiences. A simple debriefing explores:

- What went right?
- What did not go well?
- What did we learn for future practice?

Schedule wide-ranging learning reports. As senior managers, we can make it a ritual to start each staff meeting with a learning report. Someone makes a report on something learned from a class, personal reading, a trip, or even a preteen's comments at breakfast.

Involve as many senses as possible. To enhance learning and create new brain pathways, we can incorporate different senses:

- Visualize taking on a challenging task, the steps in the process, and your success.
- Tell a story to teach about new experiences and learning.
- Remember a new fact or face by attaching it to a visual (for example, Steve, a new acquaintance who has black hair).
- Promote reflection by listening to soothing music.

Exercise. A great deal of research emphasizes the positive impact of exercise on information processing and improved

connectivity in the brain. The brain, like the heart, needs oxygen and blood flow.

Teach, coach, and be coached. Teaching and coaching, which now count toward the ICMA credentialing professional development requirement, allow us to critique and consolidate our own experience and learning, pass them along, and receive feedback. Coaching and teaching are also ways to create legacy—a key developmental task at midlife. Being coached provides the same benefit. To stimulate learning, we all need coaching regardless of where we are in our careers.

These approaches pose much good news. First, in tough budget times, these learning strategies are cheap. They simply require the will to learn with intent. Second, the more we expose ourselves to new learning, the better we learn.

Self-Renewal

Learning with intent can certainly serve us and our organizations as we embrace adaptive change. It is equally powerful, however, as we struggle with the doldrums of midlife. New learning refreshes, renews, and helps us recapture the passion for our values and our work. **PM**



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FOLLOW-UP READING

John Medina, *Brain Rules: 12 Principles for Surviving and Thriving at Work, Home, and School* (Seattle: Pear Press, 2008).

Frederic M. Hudson, *The Adult Years: Mastering the Art of Self-Renewal* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).