



The Learning Style of Leaders

What is your learning style? Let me ask: as a leader, how do you process and recall new information, learn and strengthen skills, and improve your abilities? How do you empower those you lead to do the same?

Depending on when you attended school, you may have been tested and/or identified as a particular type of learner: the way you process and retain information. Typically, most children learn through the five senses, including seeing, hearing, touching, and doing/moving (which can include tasting/smelling). As adults, we bring depth of experience and greater self-awareness to our learning.

The theory of learning styles is not new and has evolved since it was introduced in the 70's by social psychologist David A. Kolb. According to Kolb, our styles are based on genetics, experiences, and current environment. With his colleague Ron Fry, Kolb identified a four-stage experiential learning cycle:

1. Observation of concrete experiences
2. Reflection and interpretation of observations (creation of hypothesis)
3. Formation of abstract concepts (generalizations)
4. Testing of new concepts in different situations

Kolb and Fry posit that learning preferences are based on two continuums:

Active experimentation <—> Reflective observation

Abstract conceptualization <—> Concrete experience

When combined, the two dimensions create four learning styles:

1. **Converger** (Active & Abstract) This type of learner is known for their practical application of ideas.

A Message from Nancy...

Let me ask you:

- Are the people on your team engaged and committed or just collecting a pay check?
- Do you have the right people in the right seats on the bus? Are *you* in the right seat?
- Is the high cost of turnover eating away your organization's bottom-line?
- Are your processes and procedures (or lack thereof) delivering productive and efficient results?
- How comfortable are the members of your senior team managing and leading others?



In today's highly competitive environment, it's no surprise that "*what got you here may not get you there.*"

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2. **Accommodator** (Active & Concrete) Known for their agility and adaptability, this type of learner is an active, risk-taking doer.
3. **Assimilator** (Reflective & Abstract) This type of learner is known for their research and planning abilities, and they excel in creating theoretical models.
4. **Diverger** (Reflective & Concrete) Known for their ability to see the big picture and create meaning, this type of learner is often most creative.
2. **Synthesizing mind:** an ability to discern crucial information across disciplines. By weeding out the false or unimportant, the synthesizing mind can organize new information (and skills) to make sense for self and others.
3. **Creating mind:** the knowledge to make quality, acceptable judgments that pose new, relevant questions, offer new solutions, and/or create new genres. Creating minds also have a disciplined mind and require a medium to work with or against along with performance opportunities.

Understanding learning styles can help us become better leaders. However, we can achieve greater success—personally and professionally—by learning *how to think and learn in new ways*. When we limit ourselves to a particular type of learner we can miss learning opportunities and important lessons, both critical to reach our full potential as leaders.

Debunk Learning Style Myths

One of the most widely accepted learning style theories is that everyone (including children and adults) has a specific aptitude for processing different types of information and instruction. Perhaps this explains why over 70 models have been created since Kolb and Fry began their work, including Neil Fleming’s VARK model: visual, auditory, read/write, or kinesthetic/tactile (hands-on).

However, [studies](#) fail to show a “statistically significant relationship” between learning styles and comprehension. You see, we learn best when we experience a blend of cognitive (knowledge/information), affective (attitudes/beliefs), and behavioral (practical/practice) activities. If you want to learn to think and learn in new ways, expand your cognitive capacities.

Howard E. Gardner, developmental psychologist, renowned professor, and senior director of Harvard Project Zero, has spent decades researching the development of the human mind. His studies on how people learn, create, lead and influence others are the foundation for his book, [Five Minds for the Future](#) (Harvard Business Review Press, 2009).

Expand Cognitive Capacities

According to Gardner, we can expand our cognitive capacities in five different kinds of minds:

1. **Disciplined mind:** a mastery in at least one specific scholarly discipline, craft, or profession. With a joyful passion to know more, a disciplined mind continues to learn as more information emerges every day.

4. **Respectful mind:** the capacity to welcome different ideas, opinions, and needs that moves beyond tolerance for greater understanding and unity. Respectful minds respond to differences among individuals and groups constructively and with empathy.
5. **Ethical mind:** the tools to conceptualize how to move beyond self-interests to improve the lot of all. Ethical minds act consistently with conceptualizations, striving for good work and ethical balance in micro to global environments.

The first three kinds of minds deal primarily with cognitive capacities. The last two deal with our relations to other human beings. Unless we increasingly place value on diversity and common good, we risk our very survival.

As Gardner writes “...it is not enough to state what each individual or group needs to survive on its own turf. In the long run, it is not possible for parts of the world to thrive while others remain desperately poor and deeply frustrated. Recalling the words of Benjamin Franklin, *“We must indeed all hang together, or, must assuredly, we shall all hang separately.”*”

The critical questions to ask are:

- With which of these minds do I already show strength?
- How can I expand my cognitive capacities?
- Where can I stretch my abilities to enable growth?
- Which of these minds do I need to learn?
- Who in my organization can help mentor me?
- How can I assist others with this knowledge?

A Mindset for Learning

As a leader, how do you learn? Let me ask: when was the last time you learned something in a new way? Was it intentional, or unexpected?

The mindset we develop over the years (heavily influenced by our caregivers, educators, or other

environmental factors, like a pandemic) exerts a powerful impact on our attitudes and beliefs toward learning and achieving.

As psychologist, Stanford professor, and author Carol S. Dweck, Ph.D., shares in her audiobook, [Mindset: The New Psychology of Success](#), (Random House Audio, 2019) our mindset creates our whole mental worldview and determines whether we approach life with an optimistic or pessimistic attitude. It shapes our goals, our attitudes toward work and relationships, and ultimately, it predicts whether we reach our full potential. How?

We have one of two basic mindsets:

1. **Growth:** open to growth and learning, this open mindset believes that one can always do better.
2. **Closed:** closed to growth and learning, this closed mindset is entrenched in the belief that natural talents and abilities predetermine success.

With a growth mindset we believe that we can always learn more, do more, and improve. We are confident, yet humble enough to do the work required to expand our potential. Our open mindset allows us to seek and accept criticism as important feedback—not a personal insult.

With a closed mindset we believe success is based on innate talents; we shouldn't have to work hard to achieve (change, grow, improve, etc.) Abilities are set in stone: either you have them, or you don't. A closed mindset requires that you prove yourself over and over again. This is the path to stagnation, or worse.

A closed mindset chips away at our confidence and sense of self. As a result, we try to look smart and accomplished at all costs. We seek validation of our worth and want to be “right,” instead of showing an interest in feedback and willingness to make changes or adjustments.

If you have an open (or growth) mindset, you know your talents can be developed and that great abilities are built over time. This is the true learning style of leaders: the path of opportunity and leadership success.

Explore Attitudes and Beliefs

Consider these four statements: which align most closely with your beliefs at this point in time?

- Your intelligence is something very basic that cannot change much.
- You can learn new things, but you can't really change how intelligent you are.
- No matter how intelligent you are, you can always improve.

- You can substantially change how intelligent you are.

The first two statements reflect a more closed mindset, while three and four indicate a more open or growth mindset. Now, consider other key areas, roles, or abilities in your professional and personal life. For example, substitute creativity, relationship skills, or parenting for intelligence. Where is there room to improve your attitude or beliefs?

The Learning Mindset for Leaders

In his best-selling work, [Good to Great](#) (Harper Business, 2011) Jim Collins writes about the type of leader who takes companies to greatness. They're not larger-than-life, charismatic types who ooze big egos and self-proclaimed talent. Rather, they're self-effacing individuals who constantly ask questions and have the ability to confront the most brutal answers. They look failures in the face, including their own, while maintaining faith that they'll succeed in the end.

Collins calls such open-mindset executives “Level 5 Leaders,” who:

- Always work on self-improvement.
- Surround themselves with the most able people they can find.
- Look squarely at their own mistakes and deficiencies.
- Identify the skills that they and their companies will need in the future.

These traits allow them to move forward with confidence grounded in facts, not built on fantasies about their own talents.

Open-mindset leaders aren't afraid of debate and questioning. They prod—and then prod deeper—to uncover realities and weaknesses.

Anyone can change his or her mindset. It requires conscious practice and vigilance, as well as a willingness to be open to learning and changing.

Still, it's not easy to let go of something that has felt like your “self” for many years and has served as your path to self-esteem. It's especially difficult to replace it with a mindset that requires you to embrace issues that feel threatening: challenge, struggle, criticism and setbacks.

You see, we adopt a closed mindset because it protects us from feeling vulnerable. However, opening up to growth allows us to experience the fulfillment of our real potential. This is the true learning style of leaders.



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