

SUMMARY LEARN OR DIE

EDWARD D. HESS



Summary of “Learn or Die” by Edward D. Hess

Written by Alyssa Burnette

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Introduction

When I was a kid, my local TV station had a segment called “Never Stop Learning.” It was meant to highlight the power of learning and growth in our community and to remind us all that we don’t stop learning when we leave school. Because, sadly, that’s what many people think. Thanks to the lifelong pressure to absorb new information and regurgitate it on a test, many people associate learning with drudgery. Or at best, they consider it a necessary evil. As a result, the desire to grow up and leave school is often synonymous with a desire to stop learning new information. However, the author acknowledges that this is a gross misunderstanding!

Our education system might have stolen the fun of learning or turned it into a chore, but at the core, learning is both fun and vital for survival! In fact, the author observes that-- from an evolutionary perspective-- when we stop learning, we literally die. And the same is true for our success in the personal and professional spheres. We can’t hope to succeed in any area of life if we’re unwilling to learn new things. That’s why, over the course of this summary, we’re going to learn about learning!

Why Learning is Essential For Survival

If primitive human beings had refused to learn, we probably would have been extinct a long time ago. Just imagine what would have happened if we had continued to play with fire after getting burned or attempted to play with dangerous animals like wolves and woolly mammoths! What if, despite being badly burned or bitten, we continued to say, “Yeah, that happened, but surely it will be different this time!” If we had done so, the human race would have been very short-lived indeed! But thankfully, we didn’t do that. Instead, we learned from our mistakes. We learned to identify and protect ourselves from danger. We learned how to hunt for food. We learned how to build shelters and stay safe. We learned to invent things that would make our lives easier.

And as we learned, human civilization evolved. We created languages and alphabets and learned to express ourselves through the written word. We founded institutions of learning and made education mandatory for everyone. And through the years, we’ve learned more and more, with each generation growing smarter, better, and more evolved than the next. We’ve learned about how the world works. We’ve learned about matters of the heart. We’ve learned how to conduct ourselves and how to be considerate of others. Without this human dedication to learning, it’s entirely possible that we might never have mastered toilet training, walking, or speech! We might shove others out of the way to get what we want or scream and throw tantrums like a toddler. That fact alone should be enough to make us grateful for the power of learning! And indeed, most of us are happy to learn these things. We’re even willing to learn new coping mechanisms and behavioral modification strategies to help us move through the world.

But the author acknowledges that we need to be willing to learn about other things too. For example, sometimes we need to learn to think outside the box. This is often more easily said than done because we spend the first eighteen years of our lives learning to conform to society. We learn, for example, to be quiet and respectful of others when they are speaking. We

learn not to be know-it-alls or show-offs or tattle-tales. And as a result of this teaching, we often allow our ideas and accomplishments to take a back seat to those of others. But the author observes that sometimes, this can harm us. Because although it's important to be respectful and kind and to know when to be quiet, it's also important to know when to speak up. In other words, we have to know when to go with the flow and when to challenge the status quo.

Knowing when to do those things is especially important from a business perspective. Because if you're unable to think outside the box, you might miss out on a lot of opportunities that require creative thinking. For example, let's say that your company is trying to come up with a product that will be the next big thing. You need to think of something that will beat your competitors and be a national sensation. (No pressure at all, right?!) Coming up with an idea like that can be tough, especially if you're not able to think critically and creatively. Faced with that amount of pressure, it might be easy to give in and avoid trying something new. After all, you might get it wrong. You might come up with an idea that nobody likes. And both of those things are totally possible. But if you never try, one thing is for certain: your competitors will beat you to it. Because sure, you might have had a bad idea or two along the way, but you might have had a great one in the end! But if you never try, you'll never know. And you'll always be beaten by the people who do keep trying, who aren't afraid of failure, and who push on to develop those awesome ideas. So, in the end, your business will likely become obsolete.

No one wants that! And that's why the author argues that our mindsets need an update. If we want to survive in the ever-changing business world, our thought processes will need a complete overhaul. And that means learning new ways of thinking and new strategies. Adopting an entirely new mindset might be tough, but the author believes that it's absolutely vital for survival.

To help you adopt that new mindset, the author posits that you must first get your emotions under control. Human beings naturally fear what they do

not understand. It's an evolutionary defense mechanism that has helped us survive and evolve. But while this might have been helpful to our neanderthal ancestors, today, it often means that we're hesitant to try new things. That's usually because we're afraid of leaping into the unknown. We worry that we'll get it wrong, that we'll fail, or that we'll look silly. In fact, sometimes we're so afraid that we just never try anything new at all! And that's why you have to get your emotions under control if you want to learn new things.

So, how do you do it? Well, the first step is to admit that failure can be an opportunity. No one likes to fail or admit that we did something badly, so we often imagine failure to be the worst possible outcome in any situation. But the truth is that failure is an opportunity to learn! Because every time we get something wrong, we have a chance to learn how to get it right. So, if we can start by relinquishing our fear and embracing failure as an opportunity, we'll be on the path to learning new things!

Surround Yourself With Go-Getters

Have you ever looked at a job application that said something like, “Seeking a self-motivated applicant?” or “Now hiring self-starters!” Have you ever wondered what that meant? Put simply, a self-starter is someone who is highly driven and internally motivated. Rather than being incentivized by externals like, “Work harder and you’ll get a week of paid vacation,” a self-starter is motivated by their own personal drive. Therefore, it’s no surprise that self-starters are exactly the type of people you want in your organization! Because whether you’re a big corporation, a small start-up, or a nonprofit, self-starters can help you get things done. Rather than existing as a drain on your resources, self-starters can actually replenish your time and energy by boosting morale, encouraging others, and delivering results.

They can also help you achieve what the author describes as the primary goal for any workplace: becoming an HPLO. HPLO stands for High Performance Learning Organization. So, what does that mean and why should that be your primary goal? Well, the author argues that learning should be the core function of your organization. That doesn’t mean that your company should operate as a university or that you should encourage everyone to read and learn instead of doing any actual work. Rather, it means that your organization should be constantly growing. Instead of prioritizing tradition or a “We’ve always done it this way” attitude, your goal should be to learn the best and most effective ways to carry out your tasks. So, that means that every single employee should be ready to speak up, take risks, and try new ideas.

Self-starters can help you cultivate this company culture because they’re naturally driven to do all of those things! Rather than being motivated by perks of the job, getting away with the bare minimum, or earning their supervisor’s approval, a self-starter is motivated by their inherent desire to be their best self. And because they want to grow and develop, they’re automatically motivated by a desire to learn. A self-starter understands that

you can never improve without learning, so they'll approach every situation with the mindset that failure is a learning opportunity and problems are a chance to overcome new obstacles. As a result, self-starters are often positive and friendly people who inspire others with their outlook on life. Who wouldn't want to work with someone like that!

So, if you want your organization to become an HPLO, you'll have to start by staffing it with the right type of people. That means you need self-starters or internally-motivated people. So, if you can find the right employees, you'll be well on your way to creating a company culture that encourages learning and growth above all.

Cultivate Psychological Safety

If people are going to learn and grow, then they need a safe environment in which to do so. And that means starting with a workplace that's grounded in psychological safety practices. But what does psychological safety mean? And how does it function in your workplace? The simplest definition is that psychological safety is exactly what it sounds like: it means that your workplace feels safe to everyone who works there. In practice, this might mean that people feel safe to speak up about their ideas or make suggestions. They might feel free to deliver presentations or advocate for themselves without fearing the mockery of their colleagues. They would feel comfortable discussing mental health struggles or family emergencies because they know that their employers would treat these concerns with respect and dignity.

In short, all of these examples are indicative of one core quality: safety. And from these examples, we can see that safety is integral for growth. After all, it's easy to see that people will struggle to learn in an environment where they're simply fighting to survive. So, if you really want to encourage learning in your workplace, make sure you create a company culture that reflects these values. And a big part of that is embracing failure. As we discussed in the previous chapters, failure is-- above all-- a learning opportunity. But if people are mocked or belittled for their failures, they will not only feel unsafe, they will come to dread any moment of imperfection. And since no one is ever perfect, that means your employees will live in a state of fear and dread.

So, if you want to eliminate that atmosphere, make sure that your employees feel free to try new things. In fact, you might even want to encourage them to fail and reflect on the lessons they've learned from their foray into something new! Of course, that doesn't mean that you want your team to be slackers or that you want them to be comfortable with shoddy work. But it does mean that you're communicating the message we discussed earlier: that failure is a learning opportunity. And by removing the

pressure to be perfect, you're creating an environment that is truly devoted to learning. So, lead by example and show your employees that we are all learning all the time. No one knows everything and no one gets it right all the time. But if you're always learning, then you're always a winner.

Final Summary

We've all heard the phrase "survival of the fittest," and we understand that this principle is a core tenet of evolutionary growth. But we probably haven't taken the time to unpack that statement and consider what that really means. The truth is that "survival of the fittest"-- like any other law of evolution-- is dependent on learning and growth. In fact, that's how human beings made it this long: we adapted. We learned. And therefore we survived. The same is true for the modern workplace. Unless we cultivate a desire to learn from our mistakes, try new things, and embrace failure, we cannot hope to survive. So, if you want your business to succeed, you must cultivate a company that prioritizes learning above all.



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