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Never Stop Learning: 3 Things We Can Learn From Yahoo! CEO Marissa Mayer

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What stops growth in your business? Is it a down economy? Difficulty in recruiting top talent?

For many leaders, both in corporate settings and for entrepreneurs, what puts the brakes on growth isn't an external factor or some new reality in the market. It's the temptation to slow down and stop learning.

It's may seem natural to slow down once you've gotten some experience under your belt. It's tempting to rest on your laurels and enjoy the benefits of having arrived at a certain level of success. You know what you're doing now. You know what works and what doesn't. You can coast. That would be fine except for the fact that business growth and future success come from *continuing* to learn.

Recently I was sitting in a caf waiting to meet a consultant who wanted to help me with a business matter, and as I waited I read a new business book. The consultant found me and sat down, looked at the title and said, "Is that book any good? I used to read all those kinds of books." The implication was that he doesn't any more. His opportunity to work with me vanished before it had begun. Why would I want to work with someone who thought he knew it all and didn't need to learn anything new?

So no matter how successful you may become, it's important to keep on learning. What may change, however, is *how* you learn as you become more and more established in your career. The more advanced you get in your career, the more advanced your learning needs to be. Your old ways of

learning don't make as much sense as they used to. The leadership development programs you've taken no longer meet your needs, perhaps. The off-sites and self-study courses aren't practical.

But just because your old ways of learning don't fit you as well as they once did doesn't mean you give up learning altogether--no matter how high up the ladder of success you climb. You need learning that's innovative, forward-looking, extremely relevant, and usually in context. You need ways of learning that help you be effective in the moment and within a varied environment. That's one reason executive coaching is so effective for successful leaders, and in fact is often why they seek out my help. What are some other ways top leaders keep up their learning? To find out, we can simply ask them.

A few years ago I interviewed Marissa Mayer, who echoed the same concern, and offered: learn from the people that inspire you. When I spoke with her, Mayer was still at Google, now she's the president and CEO of Yahoo! and has been for nearly three years. She is also well-respected as one of *Fortune's* 50 Most Powerful Women. She is a perfect example of a CEO who continues to reflect, learn and evolve.

Mayer told me: "One of the most interesting and best parts for me in my role is [that] I learn new things in every meeting. I'm always learning about my leadership style and about new domains. You have to always be learning. Having a position that has a purpose and is one of constant learning."

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So how can we follow Mayer's lead and keep learning?

Learn from the people who inspire you. When I spoke with her, Mayer told me excitedly about people she's met, read about, studied and admired, and even worked with--women from fashion designers Tory Birch and Diana Von Furstenberg to former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright to editor of Cosmo, Kate White, to fellow high-tech executive Sheryl Sandberg, the COO at Facebook. They're still learning but they're learning from their peers and people they admire. Find people who are relevant and current, but still inspire you even when you have achieved a high level of leadership yourself.

Executive coaching. The thing about coaching that makes it so valuable for senior-level leaders is that it's entirely customized. It's intended to help you be effective moment-to-moment, working toward your vision and capitalizing on your strengths. If you don't have time to take an online course or attend a retreat, coaches are always available and give you the one-on-one time that is crucial for designing personal strategies to apply learning into your working environment.

Learn from your mistakes. Mayer said she learned from launching new programs and innovations that still had bugs, such as the initial launch of Google news, which allowed her to perfect the program through re-invention and making small tweaks. Mayer said that many of Google's most successful features were done this way, to "get the product out there and have the users tell us where it was most important to spend our time." That allowed her and her team at Google to learn from mistakes and ultimately make the product better through trial and error. You can take the same approach. Try things out, allow yourself to make mistakes, but remember to seek the feedback on your efforts, and reflect on what you hear. Take the time to process and dissect the root cause of the problem that led to the mistake, look at the consequences and understand the situation well enough to

both formulate strategies to avoid it for the future and lay a better groundwork in place. Find the balance of awareness and action. Reflection and results.

Once you've done the above three strategies, take a page out of Mayer's book and reach out to your senior-level leader peer network. Ask: what are you reading right now? What ought you to be reading every day? How can you learn more about your leadership style by watching others? What can you learn from them? We can all learn from Mayer and her three strategies for growth at any level.

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