

The Secret to Better

HOW TO GET BETTER AT ANYTHING

We were born to learn. Yet all too often, learning for adults takes a back seat to performance. This is the first in a series of articles on what it takes to learn and get better...at anything.

LYNN CARNES

My art drawer is full of first attempts. These are the paintings that didn't work as planned or that I otherwise deem as not "frame-worthy." They are here to remind me that I am learning as an artist and that every painting is a practice field. Observing my artistic development over the years has led me to reflect on what it takes to get better — at anything. My three passions are art, leadership and slalom skiing, not necessarily in that order. This article begins a series about what it takes to learn and grow, in life, leadership, art or whatever your chosen domain of joy and expertise.

The ability to learn emanates from how we think, and yet the vast majority of our thoughts go unnoticed, in the background, running us without any awareness on our part. Early in my artistic endeavors, these background thoughts, unconscious though they were, limited me in so many ways. Here are some examples of how I literally hamstrung myself every time I entered the studio:

The ability to learn emanates from how we think.

- Every painting must be a masterpiece
- It's shameful to waste paper

- Discomfort must be stopped immediately!
- A mistake will ruin a painting
- If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right the first time
- If it doesn't turn out like I thought it should, I'm not talented as an artist

Can you imagine how hard it was for these hands attached to that brain to even put a brush to paper? My early work reveals those self-limiting mindsets. The stiffness and care for perfection practically jump off the page. Luckily, my art and leadership practice over time have allowed me the ability to bring forward my thoughts and to begin breaking them down as I test new thoughts. One of the first to go was the idea of wasting paper. This was revealed to me, compliments of a young girl with whom I was sharing a day in my studio. As had been done for me when I was a child, I started her a single piece of paper, some paint, and some brushes. She began enthusiastically enough. Then at some point, she wailed in dismay that she had made a mistake and

The practice of being present and less attached to outcomes leads to consistently better outcomes.

tears began welling up in her eyes. She expressed her fear in no uncertain terms that she would not be given a chance to make that painting “right” because she had no more paper. In that moment, I saw the young girl in ME, who feared wasting paper, lest I not be given another sheet. At that moment, I decided never to deprive myself or

another child in my studio of ample paper to experiment, create and feel the flow of inspiration. Since then my paper supply has remained well-stocked.

Over time, each of those limiting mindsets was replaced with enabling mindsets that generated my creativity and curiosity. Here are some examples of key shifts in my mental approach:

FROM OLD STORY	TO NEW STORY
Every painting must be a masterpiece	Every painting is a practice field
It's shameful to waste paper	It's just paint and paper; there's more in the drawer if you need it
Discomfort must be stopped immediately!	The more uncomfortable I am during a painting, the more likely it will be frame-worthy in the end
A mistake will ruin a painting	Mistakes are blessed moments; they are often the “it” factor that makes a painting work
If it's worth doing, it's worth doing right the first time	Sometimes you have to get through a “bad” painting to get to the good one
If it doesn't turn out like I thought it should, I'm not talented as an artist	Better art comes through deliberate practice; the second, third or fourth attempt allows room to experiment and work for the sake of getting better

These enabling mindsets have generated more fertile soil for my creativity. As a result, I'm less invested in amazing art and much more present to the possibilities that each painting brings. Ironically, the practice of being present and less attached to outcomes leads to consistently better outcomes.

The same state of being can make all the difference in a leadership practice. Over the years, I have observed in

myself and others many self-limiting mindsets. These run the gamut and are literally unlimited in number. Here are some examples:

- Anything worth doing is worth doing right (sound familiar)?
- If I am the boss, I have to have all the answers
- My motives are pure; everyone else's motives are not

*Keeping me safe
keeps me the same.*

- If I reveal my lack of knowledge, people will: #1, crush me or #2, think I'm unqualified to be the boss, #3, think I'm dumb...The list goes on.
- I need to know the outcome of (name that project) will be perfect before I take the first step
- No one can do (name the task) better than me
- I would rather have a handle on the details than set a new direction for our company
- A mistake will ruin a project

These thoughts are likely to be held in the background, setting up other thoughts and ultimately driving the actions of the person holding them. They act like an electronic short in a car, invisible vampires that drain you and your team of vitality and energy to lead. Coaxing these thoughts into the light

of day can be challenging. They were created to help us succeed, and they worked at the time they were created. Rather than intentionally testing and refreshing the way we approach our work, we tend to hold on to the ideas that served us before. In fact, in this complex world, we are grateful for the autopilot responses that keep us from having to think too hard.

Untangling the thoughts that work for us from that which doesn't is difficult work...really hard work. They may have been taught to us by people we care about and thus rejecting them feels like disloyalty. These thoughts may protect us by keeping us comfortable in areas that are otherwise uncomfortable. After time and reflection, I came to realize that the mindset, "I'm not talented enough," was just exactly that kind self-limiting, self-protective mindset. The twisted logic went something like this:

I'm not satisfied with this painting.
I really believe I did my very best here.
I can't imagine what else I could have done.
Furthermore, I am afraid to try something different from what I just did.
After all, it might be worse and I don't think I could take that.
Therefore, I admit it: I'm not talented!

With a reluctant willingness to look deeper at uncovering this unbalanced thinking, I began to see how this was really circular logic, designed to keep me comfortable and running in place into perpetuity. This thinking is unbalanced because it cuts possibility off at the pass. It's designed for one purpose and one purpose only: to keep

me safe. And keeping me safe keeps me the same.

Most of the time, seeing these thoughts in the light of day reveals how this frame of reference impedes our learning and growth, and even our current effectiveness.

Here are some examples of shifts that bring the mindset into balance:

Practicing with deliberation and intent is a key step in the secret to better.

FROM OLD STORY	TO NEW STORY
Anything worth doing is worth doing right	We have to be better than anyone else at a few things, where we need to devote time and attention; in everything else we should "satisfice"
If I am the boss, I have to have all the answers	Asking good questions and getting those around me to think leads to more buy-in and better solutions
My motives are pure; everyone else's motives are not	If I assume positive intent, I give people the space to operate with their best intentions
I need to know the outcome of (name that project) will be perfect before I take the first step	Just start. It's much easier to see the next step once we take a small step. Most huge change starts with almost imperceptible shifts.
No one can do (name the task) better than me	My ability to prepare others to handle tasks will free me to assume more responsibility
A mistake will ruin a project	Mistakes are a critical part of the learning process; if we are not making mistakes, we are not innovating

Shifting one's mindset seems simple in hindsight, yet it isn't so simple when you're in the midst of it.

Rearranging your thoughts leads to discomfort. It brings about an awareness of not knowing and perhaps not being as skilled as we would prefer while

we attempt something new. Practicing with deliberation and intent is a key step in the secret to better. The reward is learning with a vitality and energy that enriches our lives and brings us closer to living with purpose. We were born to learn. We were born to grow.

Stay tuned for Chapter Two. We'll address the importance and value of practice.

Lynn Carnes accelerates change and unleashes leadership performance in organizations, especially in context of challenges without easy answers. She loves to hear about how the experiments with these ideas turn out. To contact her or share your experiences, go to www.carnesassociates.com or email lcarnes@carnesassociates.com.