

Lessons on Learning



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This month I've been reading *Nonsense: The Power of Not Knowing*, by Jamie Holmes. One of the memorable reminders in the book is about the importance of learning, something my team has been focused on recently as we prepare to unveil our 2017 line-up of risk-learning and leadership opportunities for nonprofit and insurance sector professionals. In *Nonsense*, Holmes nudges the reader to embrace inevitable ambiguity and uncertainty. At the Center we sometimes meet earnest risk professionals who believe that if they focus intently on their risk landscape, uncertainty can be reduced or even 'managed.' We find the opposite to be true; reflecting on a changing risk landscape or ecosystem may reveal new, puzzling uncertainties!

Holmes reminds his reader that "What counts then, isn't so much success or failure but whether we stay in learning mode, continue to seek out ambiguity, and view uncertainty as the doorway to invention." This sentiment resonates with me, and represents a philosophy my team works hard to embrace, demonstrate, and instill in the professional teams that come to us for advice and support. Here are a few simple ways to remind yourself and others that learning is indeed fundamental.

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- **Relax, don't rush learning.** Have you ever found yourself tuning out while listening to a webinar, attending a workshop or reading something educational forwarded by a coworker? Your short attention span might be short-circuiting your capacity to learn if you become anxious when bold lessons aren't immediately obvious. With the pace of today's world, we might be conditioned to think that slow learning is the enemy of achievement. Yet many skills and concepts worth learning can take months or years to truly grasp and apply. Just like happiness or health, achieving learning is an ongoing pursuit, and learning goals rest on a continuum with ever-reaching endpoints. Invest in your learning by giving yourself time to soak up all the tidbits you can. And as a manager, remember Plato's advice to "never discourage anyone who continually makes progress, no matter how slow." Never extinguish an employee's fire for learning simply because you are impatient with the results.
- **Look for learning in all the wrong places.** If you're limiting your learning horizon to industry publications or CLE seminars, you're missing the opportunity to be a voracious learner. Every day of your life is a collection of experiences—from the immediately gratifying (e.g., meeting someone with whom you share common interests, or consummating a new business opportunity), to the eminently frustrating (such as a nine hour flight delay or missing an inflexible deadline). Ultimately, it's up to you to decide whether and how to grow from these experiential learning opportunities.
- **Learn with grace.** A couple of years ago I joined several friends for a dance lesson. Years of being a

faithful fan of “So You Think You Can Dance,” and a dutiful ‘dance mom’ were of little use as I clumsily attempted a few simple steps. But watching my friends Patti and Ingrid enjoy the process of learning the steps reminded me that grace is a state of mind. The instructor’s suggestion to ‘smile when you dance,’ gave me the jolt of confidence I needed to survive and enjoy the lesson. Graceful learning is always possible when we gratefully receive and thoughtfully process feedback-viewing it as a gift to make our efforts more fruitful.

- **Make a mindful mess.** One of the more powerful themes in “Nonsense” is about how human beings are prone to ‘order the world according to categories,’ as a way of reducing the ‘messy world’ in order to manage it. The author adds that “...resolving something-fitting it into a mental box-also means that you stop scrutinizing it. Recognition means closure, and it marks the end of thinking, looking, and listening.” The inclination to be ‘neat’ is a cornerstone of risk management practice; many Center clients look to us to help them categorize or make sense of the complex risks they face. Although we often design risk ‘buckets’ or categories, from time to time I believe that the categories are inherently misleading: they wrongly suggest that an organized list represents progress in understanding and preparing for inevitable uncertainty.
- **Take a page from Pollyanna’s playbook.** Learning is often a great challenge-one that can sometimes be so daunting that a person might choose to quit before achieving his or her learning goals. To learn something new, you might be forced to alter or unlearn a skill or belief you have held for many years. When learning feels scary or you can’t grasp the promise or benefit of a learning opportunity, then take a page from Pollyanna’s playbook. Renowned German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel said “the learner always begins with finding fault, but the scholar sees the positive merit in everything.” Before closing the door on learning, take another peek with optimistic eyes. Opportunities abound for those who envision them.

As I neared the end of “Nonsense” I happened upon the lesson that I found most valuable in the book; Holmes writes, “The openness at the heart of the scientific spirit means never taking error personally, seeing success as provisional, and welcoming criticism with dispassionate grace.” For me, these words are wonderful reminders of the extraordinary power of a learning mindset. When we accept our mistakes for the wisdom they inspire and look beyond ‘wins’ to ‘what’s next?’ our capacity to learn and grow is limitless.

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