



You Learning or Falling Behind?—Ten Investments to Make In Yourself

by Mike Hawkins
mike@alpinelink.com



I'm fortunate to work with many top performers and great leaders. One trait I consistently find in successful people is their desire to learn and develop. Top performers continually set and pursue personal development goals. They make self-improvement a top priority. They not only perform their day-to-day responsibilities but also take time to invest in their ongoing development. They know if they aren't developing, they're falling behind. They know their industry, market, and organization continually change and so must they. Anything less is complacency which quickly becomes obsolescence and irrelevance.

If you had extra money to invest, where would you invest it? What if your options were material possessions, a stock/bond portfolio, commodities/assets, or yourself? Would you prefer to invest in possessions that wear out, the vagaries of the market, or that which improves your own capabilities and most every quality of your life? Consider that investing in yourself, whether with your money or time, is your best investment. It provides the highest impact on your earnings potential at work and quality of life at home. Your skills, relationships, net worth, and overall satisfaction with life are directly proportional to the degree to which you invest in your self-improvement. Improvements you make in yourself provide an increasing return just like the compounding effect of interest.

For top performers, the question isn't whether or not to invest in themselves, but how to invest. They learn through their daily on-the-job experiences, but don't stop there. Depending on their development goals, they utilize other learning resources such as book clubs, public seminars, industry training programs, expert blogs, and newsletters. They also take advantage of mentoring, coaching, and special assignments when available.

Over my career I've attended many company-sponsored training seminars and advanced business school programs. I've read non-fiction books and tried to stay up with contemporary thought leadership, but it wasn't until I started my consulting company that I realized how little I actually invested in my own self-development. The reality of my learning was that I relied more on what I could learn from executing my daily responsibilities than from focused individual development.

I remember being proud of my abilities during my tenure as global industry general manager with Scient and then as executive vice president for LogicaCMG. I knew I wasn't perfect, but thought I did a good job and knew quite a bit. When I started my consulting practice, however, and began reading a book a week, completing self-assessments, obtaining targeted feedback, attending weekly webinars, engaging with seasoned industry leaders, and working with my business partners on challenging assignments, I discovered I didn't know as much as I thought. Now when I look back on my past work, I'm embarrassed by how little I knew. All learning is beneficial, but focused individual development that leverages multiple learning methods enables a level of learning that informal on-the-job learning doesn't. Let there be no misunderstanding—there is a difference in learning methods.

If you've not thought much about how you learn, think about it. How you learn and how much you learn determine your success. What you know now isn't as important as your ability to learn and develop in the future. You may be a college graduate, certified professional, or seasoned veteran in your domain, but if you don't continually develop, you will fall behind. Expect your industry colleagues and competitors who do develop to leap frog you and leave you wondering what happened.

Follow these ten tips to developing yourself and obtaining the most from your learning opportunities:

- 1) **Learn from your experience** – Studies find that over 80% of what people learn comes informally. This isn't to suggest that you only rely on your job experience, but don't miss out on it either. When you make a mistake, miss a sale, scrap a part, resolve an argument, or overcome adversity, stop to consider what just happened. Ask yourself, "What might I learn from this?" Before a day or even an hour passes, take note of what you might do better next time.



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- 2) **Attend training programs** - Take advantage of industry training programs, company seminars, webinars, and other formal education opportunities. Colleges, industry associations, your company's learning organization, and private trainers spend countless hours creating coursework that provides valuable learning content. Ask to be added to your industry association's mailing list for educational programs as well as those provided by your local colleges, HR department, and private trainers. Take time to attend at least one course a month.
- 3) **Read** – Authors spend years if not a lifetime writing books that you can buy for less than \$30 and read in less than a few hours. There is no better return on your learning investment than to read non-fiction books. Read a little every day. Read for 30 minutes when you wake up or before you go to bed. Start or join a team book club. Read newsletters, industry periodicals, blogs, or whatever you have access to that provides good learning content. Yes, you already receive too much email, but selectively subscribe to the blogs or newsletters of the thought leaders in your industry. You can't afford to be disconnected from them.
- 4) **Take on challenging assignments** – As projects and initiatives come up at work, in your community, place of worship, or wherever—volunteer. Raise your hand when opportunities come along to accept a new challenge. Move out of your comfort zone and put yourself into situations that will provide new experiences. Strive to gain new perspectives. Accept invitations to go to new places and try new activities. You learn the most about yourself, as well as others, when you participate in new and varied circumstances.
- 5) **Meet with wise people** – Seek wise counsel regularly. Get to know the thought leaders in your company, industry, and community. Develop relationships with the consultants, suppliers, or partners who are experts in your domain. Seek mentoring relationships with them if available. Join or form peer groups with people who you can share ideas with. Join local chapters of your industry associations or other local organizations that meet on a regular basis to exchange ideas and share best practices. If you are the type who doesn't ask for help or doesn't admit you don't know something, realize that you are missing out. You don't know it all. Build or become part of a network of smart and diverse people who you can regularly talk with and share ideas.
- 6) **Set learning goals** – Each year, or even each quarter, review your performance. Reflect on what you do well and need to continue as well as what you don't do so well and need to improve. Identify the areas in which you want to grow and develop. It may be in areas related to your domain skills such as programming, marketing, engineering, or sales. It may be in areas related to general skills such as speaking, writing, listening, or getting organized. If you are in management, it may be in areas related to improving your employee's productivity, coaching them in their skill development, or improving employee engagement. Identify and document whatever it is that you need to work on. Make learning part of your goal setting.
- 7) **Assess yourself** – Complete self-assessments. When opportunities arise to participate in a 360 survey, personality assessment, or some other capabilities assessment, sign up for it. Look for assessments in the areas in which you aspire to develop. Many are online and free. My own website, www.alpinelink.com, offers several free assessments that you might find valuable. Other coaches and consultants provide assessments too as do many books. I try to take at least a couple of assessments a year. Over the last eight years I've completed over twenty assessments that have provided valuable insights about myself that I wouldn't have otherwise learned. After completing your assessment, ask someone to help you interpret it. Others help you avoid rationalizing away or overlooking insights from your assessments.



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- 8) **Ask for feedback** - Asking for feedback and receiving correcting counsel isn't much fun for most people, but it provides one of the most valuable learning experiences a person can have. For each of your development goals, ask your closest colleagues for their perspectives on what and how you could be better. Let them know you aspire to develop and would be grateful for their candid feedback. If relevant to the nature of your development, use evaluation forms or a video camera to capture feedback. If you are developing in an area such as speaking, coaching, or listening, video record yourself in action. It can be a humbling experience, but one that will give you truly unbiased and valuable feedback. Also, when asked to give someone else feedback, whether informally or through a survey such as a 360 assessment, take the time to give your feedback. It will not only help your colleagues but encourage them to do the same for you.
- 9) **Work with a coach** – As an executive coach, I'm a bit biased, but after coaching hundreds of executives over thousands of coaching sessions, there is no doubt that coaching can provide enormous benefits. It is almost unheard of that anyone at the top of their game or profession isn't benefiting from the help of a coach. There are few professional athletes, singers, performers, speakers, or senior executives who don't benefit from a coach. If you have the financial resources, seek out a veteran coach with extensive coaching experience as well as knowledge of your industry and role. Ask them to assist you in achieving your development goals and challenge you to take your performance up a level.
- 10) **Apply your knowledge** – Being smart and knowledgeable might be satisfying, but without application it isn't very valuable. Until you apply your lessons learned, your learning is academic. Find ways to put your knowledge into practice. As soon as you have completed a project, attended a class, or finished a book, put your new ideas into productive use. Share your knowledge with others. Teach them and engage them in rigorous discussion. Ask them to join you in applying your knowledge. Ask them to help you practice it or test it out. Have them role play it with you or try it in a low-risk environment. Don't let your experience be conceptual.
- 11) **Bonus!** – When you learn, take notes and file them for future retrieval. Your memory is limited. Studies find that you forget 90 percent of what you don't put into immediate practice. Take notes during your reading, training, and coaching to reinforce the information in your memory and create a back-up copy. Create an organized filing system to put your notes and reference materials into. Synchronize your online and offline folders. Stacks of papers, hundreds of online documents scattered over your storage media, and thousands of emails in your inbox don't make for efficient information retrieval.

If you don't perform most of these learning activities, realize that you are falling behind. With the pace of technological, economic, and social change in our world today, if you are not actively learning, you're falling behind. You might not know it, but you are probably one of those people so stuck in your rut that you don't know you're in a rut. You are the complacent employee or boss who keeps doing what you're doing and expecting to obtain better results, yet can't quite seem to obtain them. Realize that your lack of better results isn't due to your colleagues, processes, systems, customers, or other elements of your organizational ecosystem. It is you.

Make learning a top priority. It will not only improve you but also the world around you.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.activatingyourambition.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.alpinelink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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