



Ten Tips to Informal Learning

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Learning to learn is the foundation to long-term sustained accomplishment. People who know how to learn new skills, replace bad habits with good habits, and change their behavior are the ones who become top athletes, successful business people, respected friends, admired spouses, and community leaders.

I was watching Tim Tebow's first start as an NFL quarterback a couple of weeks ago when the announcer made the comment that Tebow needed to improve in several areas, but that he had no doubt Tebow would. The announcer's thinking was that because Tebow knows how to learn, he will learn whatever he needs to learn to be a great NFL quarterback.

I see the same characteristic in my coaching work. The most successful executives are the ones that continuously learn. It doesn't matter what they don't know right now as long as they have the desire and know how to learn whatever it is they need to learn.

When you mention the word "learn", many people think about classroom education and training programs. Most learning opportunities however are less formal. Most learning happens as a byproduct of experience. Studies show that over 80% of what people learn comes informally.

Here are ten tips to learning outside of the classroom and getting the most from your learning opportunities:

- **Identify the lesson to be learned** - Don't miss the opportunity to learn from your experience. 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?"
- **Take notes** – Your memory has its limitations. Studies show you will forget 90 percent of what you learn if you don't reinforce it. Note taking not only reinforces your memory, it makes a back-up copy. Take notes from your books, seminars, meetings, and calls. Transfer them to your computer for future retrieval.
- **Get organized** – Create a filing system to put your notes and reference material into. Stacks of papers and thousands of emails in your inbox don't make for efficient information retrieval. Synchronize your online and offline folders. Create folders for the topics you stay on top of.
- **Seek new experiences** – Routines are part of life, but they also create deep ruts that prevent you from learning. Seek new perspectives and experiences. Get out of your comfort zone. Accept invitations to go to different places and try new activities. You will not only learn something new, you'll learn more about yourself.
- **Accept challenging assignments** – Take advantage of opportunities that come up at work, in your community, or place of worship. Volunteer for special assignments. You'll never hit the ball out of the park if you don't step up to the plate and take a swing at it. Look for and engage in challenges that will expand your knowledge, experience, and ability.
- **Read books** – People at the top of their profession stay current by reading non-fiction books. Let me repeat, successful people read. Any questions? How about starting a book club? Read at least one book a month.
- **Attend seminars** – Seminars and webinars are great ways to learn from the experts. Selectively choose three to four a month to attend.
- **Seek wise counsel** – People, particularly those different from you, are a great source of knowledge. If you are the type that doesn't ask for help or doesn't admit that you don't know something, you are missing out. Build a network of smart and diverse people that you can regularly talk with and share ideas.



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- **Work with a coach or mentor** – Create a relationship with someone that will help you learn. Personal coaches and mentors will help you discover insights you won't see for yourself. They will challenge you, encourage you, and help hold you accountable.
- **Apply yourself** – Knowledge is academic until you apply it. Find ways to apply your learning quickly after you learn it. Don't let your experience be conceptual.

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 Corporation (www.alpinelink.com), a consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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