

LEADERSHIP

5 Tips to Keep You Sharp

Constant learning is the foundation of a successful business owner.

Scott Halford

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It hurts to learn. Yet, learning keeps us mentally agile well into our golden years, and it's the hallmark of successful entrepreneurs. Keeping up with what you don't know has the amazing ability to transform what you do know into the next million buck idea. Constant learning is the grease we need to stay competitive.

Many people slow their learning down once they've been labeled an "expert" or reached some degree of success. They may figure their accomplishments are evidence that they know enough--they would be mistaken.

Consider that the half-life of a college education is now three to five years. That means that much of what a student learns during their freshman year will be obsolete by the time they're a junior. Continual learning is the key to keeping you sharp in your market and in your mind.

You need to keep jamming new stuff into your head because your brain feeds on new data and while you're least paying attention, it makes connections all by itself that appear as insight. Much of this goes on in the background while you sleep and while you reflect on what's happening in your world.

If you set the conditions right, your brain will sift and sort--even the most seemingly insubstantial factoid--and provide you with your company's next product or service. You never know what random bit will be incorporated into your old info trove to come up with that blockbuster. The message: Get very curious and be deliberate about learning.

Many of us get so busy running our businesses that all of our learning is on the job and in life. It's not the kind of learning that consistently taxes the brain. Then when we do go back to some formal kind of education, the ramp-up time to remember how to learn again is excruciating and many people give up. There are ways to keep your mind in tip-top shape so that you are always engaged in deep learning.

Here's what the brainiacs do:

1. **Read one article a day written by someone with an opposing opinion.**
Your brain chemistry switches on when you are met with competing knowledge or an opinion that flies in the face of your own experience. Be open to it. Read or listen to it all the way through, no matter how frustrated you become.
2. **Learn one radically new thing every day and apply it to your life.**
Geniuses find unrelated things and put them together to come up with something new. You only do that by adding to your repertoire of experiences and knowledge.
3. **Teach someone something that you're passionate about.** The teaching process reveals new learning for you since people have different questions about what you're teaching. It causes you to stretch in your topic area. You have to be open to your knowledge being challenged. Surround yourself with people who don't think just like you do. Be brave enough to have dissention.

4. **Get deep sleep.** Entrepreneurs are notorious for claiming to only need two or three hours of sleep each night. Yet, research shows that neural connections are made when you've hit the deepest stage of sleep, and that occurs typically over a seven to nine hour period.
5. **Practice "awake sleeping" or reflection.** This is another way to allow the brain to find the new connections you're looking for. Find a few times a day when you can turn off anything that electronically gets a hold of you and simply reflect on what your needs are and how things are going. Be open to the ideas that come flooding into the canals of your mind.

By stretching your brain every day, you keep it young and smart. The combination of the wisdom from experiences and your constant new knowledge will be one of the most powerful innovation tools you will possess.