



Bradley R. Staats

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INSIDE THE BIG IDEAS

Never Stop Learning

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Dear NBIC members,

Happy summer! From reading your posts over the past few months, it's clear that this book club is dominated by a love of learning. So I'm delighted to present *Never Stop Learning* by Brad Staats.

Along with being a leading expert on learning at work, Brad is a voracious learner. His research has taken him from cardiac surgeons grappling with high-stakes failures in American hospitals to software teams figuring out how to onboard new teammates in India.

For the first time, this book makes Brad's practical insights available to a wide audience. He reveals why we learn from others' failures but not our own (what? me? fail?!), when we should specialize vs. broaden our expertise, and how we can create collaborations that make us smarter.

Never Stop Learning was the nudge I needed to quit hesitating to ask questions and begin carving out more time for reflection and exploration. I hope it will have the same effect on you.

Adam Grant



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NEVER STOP LEARNING

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OVERVIEW

"There is no end to education. It is not that you read a book, pass an examination, and finish with education. The whole of life, from the moment you are born to the moment you die, is a process of learning."

This quote from Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti lies at the heart of what the Next Big Idea Club is all about. Learning deserves a place in our lives at all times—to help us grow, and to help us achieve.

And in *Never Stop Learning*, Bradley Staats takes that crucial conviction one step further. He explains that, in the face of rapid technological advances and a globalized economy, it is through learning that we can stay relevant and ahead of the curve.

But the problem is that we're not very good at learning—we forget to learn alongside others, we struggle to accept responsibility for our failures, and we rush from task to task without pausing to reflect. So Staats takes us deep inside the psychological biases and tendencies that keep us locked into old ways of thinking, and outlines concrete steps we can take to overcome them. The end result? We become "dynamic learners," prepared to not only cope with a changing world, but also to leave our mark on it.

Read on for 8 Big Ideas from Never Stop Learning: Stay Relevant, Reinvent Yourself, and Thrive. And be sure to visit NextBigIdeaClub.com to view exclusive video insights featuring author Bradley Staats, plus an exclusive conversation between Bradley Staats and Adam Grant.



8 BIG IDEAS FROM 'NEVER STOP LEARNING'

1. Learn from Failure

There's no way to sugarcoat it: we all fail. But within each failure is a possible learning experience, and these three strategies can help bring it out:

- 1) **Dare to take a risk.** Due to what's known as "impact bias," we tend to overestimate how painful a future failure would be. So don't let your predictions intimidate you—seize the opportunity and see what happens.
- 2) **Own your failure.** It's tough to admit personal responsibility when you fall short. But if you always blame outside forces for your failure—or deny that you failed at all—you won't see how you could have acted differently, or hope to perform better next time.
- 3) **Destigmatize failure.** Bring your personal struggles out into the open, both at home and at work. Because the truth is that everyone fails—even Walt Disney was once fired from a newspaper job (for a lack of creativity!) So let's stop shielding ourselves from failure, and begin embracing it as a teacher.

2. Focus on Process, Not Outcome

While many of us realize that small, daily habits add up to big achievements, the focus of our learning often remains in the wrong place—on the outcome, not the process. Baseball analysts, for example, used to examine stats like batting average—how often a player gets a hit—to evaluate the player's overall ability. But now they look more closely at the factors that determine that average—like how hard a ball is hit off the bat—to improve players' practice time and produce better results.

As they deliberately focus on one small part of the process at a time, these analysts demonstrate something akin to the Japanese concept of *kaizen*, or continuous learning, which is central to Toyota's company philosophy. Ironically, it is when we temporarily forget about our goal that we learn about and refine our process, which then leads to the outcome that we desire.

3. Ask the Right Questions

It's no secret that questions lead to learning, but even so, many of us struggle to ask the right ones—and to make the most of the answers. To change that, try following these strategies:

- 1) **Check your confirmation bias.** It's a well-studied psychological phenomenon—people seek new information that only confirms their existing beliefs. So make a conscious effort to question your views and consider opposing ones.
- 2) **Remember that people like questioners.** We may fear that asking a question will make us look foolish or ignorant, but in fact, research shows that people see questioners as responsive and socially perceptive.
- 3) **Surround yourself with an assertive, diverse team.** When a group of yes-men and yes-women never question their leader, everyone loses. We all need companions with whom we can exchange tough but honest questions and answers.

4. Recharge and Reflect

Years ago, Bradley received a piece of advice from a mentor that has stuck with him ever since: "Don't avoid thinking by being busy." Taking the time to slow down is good for learning, and good for our brains. Here's how to make it happen:

- 1) **Be intentional about it.** Set time aside to reflect on how your performance has been at work lately, and where you see room for improvement. (If your mind wanders or you get bored, that's okay! Boredom has been shown to supercharge creativity.)
- 2) **Stay active.** Regular exercise may increase the size of the hippocampus, an area of the brain that helps you learn.
- 3) **Get some sleep.** Only 1 to 3% of people can function at a high level after only five or six hours of sleep. Instead of working long into the night, hit the hay and start again in the morning.
- 4) **Go on vacation.** The average American doesn't use all her time off, but vacations help us avoid burnout, recover energy, and clear our minds for future learning.



5. Be Yourself

Bringing our true selves to work is a great way to learn better, but it's not always easy. Many of us struggle with the "impostor phenomenon," the belief that we're not smart or talented enough to occupy our role. We then feel pressured to speak and act like someone else just to get by.

That's a problem, because acting authentically gives rise to positive emotions that re-shape all kinds of learning experiences. Studies show that when we feel good, we have improved reaction time, draw on different cognitive resources, and have better overall learning and understanding—not to mention better relationships with others.

So wherever you work, bring your authentic self into the space by decorating your office with pictures of friends and family, or other visuals that feel true to you. And look for opportunities to add some positivity to your day, like writing a letter of gratitude to someone who has helped you in the past. This authenticity paired with positivity will likely help you learn better.

6. Play to Your Strengths

Many of us are told that once we've identified a weakness in our skillset, we should work to address it, and hopefully turn it into a strength. If the weakness is big and problematic—a "critical" weakness—then that is good advice.

But most weaknesses are peripheral to our path to success, and rather than forcing ourselves to needlessly conquer them, it's far better to double down on our strengths. Research shows that when people use their strengths during the day, they are more likely to report feeling energetic and well-rested, which improves their performance and motivation all the more.

Keep in mind, however, that most people aren't as good as they think they are at identifying their own strengths. So try asking trusted friends and family members about where you shine and what you do best—then learn how to cultivate those skills even further.

7. Specialize Today, Seek Variety Tomorrow

We tend to believe that we can either be a specialist, with refined expertise in one area, or a generalist, with a broad scope of superficial knowledge. But what if we didn't have to choose?

Bradley's research has shown that in the short-term, focused specialization is quite useful. When someone tries to multitask on a given day, their brain's working memory gets overloaded, and their learning suffers. But his research also revealed that over a longer period of time, engaging with a variety of tasks actually improves workers' overall learning and motivation.

So it's time to stop thinking of specialization and variety as opposing forces; it's by specializing in the short term and seeking variety in the long term that we can maximize learning. In the end, hopefully we become a "T-shaped person," someone with some knowledge about a broad range of subjects, and deep knowledge about one specialized area. You truly can have the best of both worlds—you just have to tailor your work goals as you progress from shorter to longer time frames.

8. Learn from Others

Learning can feel like a deeply personal journey, but at its best, it's a shared experience. To better learn alongside the people around you, try these four techniques:

- 1) **Build relationships early and often.** Reaching out to others, especially *before* you need their help, is a great way to build a foundation for future interactions.
- 2) **Work with the same people repeatedly.** Working with the same team members helps you develop what the late Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner called a "transactive memory system," or TMS, which helps you store and retrieve knowledge about who knows what. As the TMS grows, the group's trust and efficiency will steadily improve.
- 3) **Change how you interact.** We sometimes view interactions with coworkers as a competition, with each person trying to look smarter or better informed in front of the boss. So try adopting an "inquiry perspective," one that focuses on listening to, learning from, and collaborating with the people around you.
- 4) **Teach.** In preparing to pass along what we know, we are forced to refine every detail of our knowledge, and our pupils may raise questions and offer thoughts that further enrich our understanding.



TELL YOUR FRIENDS

Here are some of our favorite stories, facts, and statistics from *Never Stop Learning*—memorable moments and ideas that you can share with everyone you know!

Viagra was invented by mistake. Pfizer scientists were developing a drug in the hopes of treating spasms in the coronary arteries that cause chest pain. The trials failed, but the researchers noticed an interesting side effect: patients on the drug experienced a significant increase in their interest in sexual activity. And just like that, a billion-dollar breakthrough was born.

Breakups hurt—literally. Researchers at the University of Michigan did a study in which they showed participants pictures of romantic partners who had recently broken up with them. The researchers also placed a very hot object on the forearms of these participants. When they checked the fMRI scans, they saw that the two painful experiences activated similar parts of their brains.

Correlation doesn't imply causation—and there are some weird correlations out there. From 2000 to 2009, per capita cheese consumption in the U.S. showed a 94.7% correlation with the number of people who died by becoming entangled in their bed-sheets. From 1999 to 2010, the marriage rate in Kentucky showed a 95.2% correlation with the number of people who drowned by falling out of a fishing boat.

We get a lot less inquisitive as we get older. One study found that 70–80% of kids' dialogue consists of questions, but the same figure is only 15–25% for adults. Which is a shame, because curiosity is associated with better physical and mental health. People who ask more questions in speed dating are even more likely to get a follow-up date!

The Japanese have a word for dying from working too much: *karoshi*. In 2015, the Japanese government certified 189 people as having died from *karoshi*, but experts believe that the true number may be in the thousands.

Still psyched about soccer after the World Cup? Here's a fun fact: One study showed that on penalty kicks, goalies almost always jump to the left or right, and stay in the center only 6.3% of the time. And yet the kicks go to the center a whopping 39.2% of the time. The study's authors concluded that **if goalies would simply stay in the center, they'd have the chance to block 33% of the kicks**—instead of blocking 14.2% and 12.6% of the kicks by jumping left or right, respectively.

The more joy you give, the more joy you get. In one study, people who were assigned to spend money on a gift for someone else were happier than people assigned to spend it on a gift for themselves.

QUIZ

Pop quiz time! Studies show that tests and quizzes can boost your recall of what you've studied. Get ready to lock in your learning about... learning!

- 1) Imagine that you are at the supermarket, and your cashier is irritable and dismissive, rushing you along to get to the next person. You walk out with your groceries, concluding that she is simply an unpleasant person—without considering that she's maybe just having a stressful day. This is an example of which problematic psychological tendency?
 - A) Impact bias
 - B) Fundamental attribution error
 - C) Outcome bias
 - D) Larry David syndrome
- 2) Many decry the flight of jobs from the United States as companies go looking for cheaper labor. **True or False:** From 2000 to 2010, only 13% of manufacturing job losses were due to jobs moving to another country, whereas 87% were due to technological advances and productivity increases that reduced the need for labor.
 - A) True
 - B) False—the two factors each accounted for about 50% of the job losses.
 - C) False—jobs moving to other countries accounted for over 70% of the overall losses.
 - D) False—have you ever seen an actual robot? *Exactly.*
- 3) Imagine a basketball coach whose team plays an excellent game, but narrowly loses, causing him to drastically change their practice strategy. Now imagine a second coach whose team plays poorly but still wins, causing him to maintain his current practice strategy. Both coaches are demonstrating which problematic psychological tendency?
 - A) Impact bias
 - B) Outcome bias
 - C) Alien Hand Syndrome
 - D) Fundamental attribution error



- 4) Learning scholar Chris Argyris proposes that to learn effectively, we must engage our experiential learning system, and also take a more conscious, controlled approach to information processing. What is this two-step view called?
- A) The mirror-image dynamic
 - B) The Truffle Shuffle
 - C) The double-loop process
 - D) The think-feel process
- 5) One part of the Yerkes-Dodson Law states that high levels of anxiety worsen our performance. The other part states that low levels of anxiety _____.
- A) also worsen our performance, but to a lesser degree
 - B) are a natural response to seeing a Karaoke machine
 - C) improve our reaction time
 - D) help us focus
- 6) A 2016 Gallup survey revealed that only 33% of U.S. workers and 13% of global workers are engaged at work. But those who _____ at work are six times more likely to report feeling engaged.
- A) use their strengths
 - B) like their coworkers
 - C) get along with their boss
 - D) snack aggressively
- 7) Living in a learning economy means that we must approach learning with four mindsets: *focused*, *fast*, *frequent*, and ____.
- A) frantic
 - B) fun-loving
 - C) flexible
 - D) frisky
- 8) Many people assume that if a team is doubled in size, they can complete their task in half the time. This is rarely the case, because more people means ____.
- A) more distractions
 - B) a greater likelihood that certain team members won't get along
 - C) more time and energy required to coordinate everyone's work
 - D) more intense Pokémon battles
- 9) Imagine that the news has just reported mechanical problems with a Delta Airlines plane, which caused it to make an emergency landing halfway into its trip. As a result, you assume that Delta planes are less reliable than others, and decide to book your next trip with Southwest instead. This decision demonstrates which problematic psychological tendency?
- A) Availability bias
 - B) Fundamental attribution error
 - C) Impact bias
 - D) Sudden impact bias
- 10) Some people can still function at a high level after only five or six hours of sleep. Of the people who believe they would be high-functioning, how many truly are?
- A) 5%
 - B) 28%
 - C) 56%
 - D) 113%, and my math skills are perfect, too.



INTERACTIVE

As described in Chapter 7, playing to your strengths is a crucial part of learning and success in all that you do. Although we often think we know where we shine, studies show that most people struggle to accurately identify their own strengths.

That's where the **Reflected Best Self Exercise (RBSE)** comes in. At the end of this exercise, you will know not only where your strengths lie, but also how to make use of them.

Step 1: Identify Respondents and Request Feedback

Begin by thinking of ten to fifteen people who know you well. Try to create a mix of people who have seen you in a variety of different contexts—perhaps a combination of close friends, family members, current coworkers, former coworkers, fellow members of your club or volunteer organization... You get the idea.

Next, reach out to each person—ideally via email—and ask them to identify two to three times when they saw you at your best, and accomplishing things that were meaningful to them.

Step 2: Find Common Themes

Once you have received everyone's responses, find a quiet spot and read through all of them. (This can be a moving experience... Grab some tissues!) Once you've read everything, go back through the stories looking for commonalities. Do you often persevere in the face of obstacles? Are you a natural leader? Do you find creative solutions to tough problems? Use the table below to organize your thoughts:

Common Theme	Examples Given

Step 3: Bring It All Together

Using your own reflections and the themes you identified in the chart above, create a written self-portrait. What motivates you? What do you stand for? How do you like to spend your time? Write about who you are and what you do best below:

When I am at my best, I _____

Step 4: Create an Action Plan

With your newfound self-knowledge, you are ready to design a plan for the future. Identify which of your specific strengths and passions you'd like to focus on, and brainstorm about specific actions you can take to further incorporate them into your life—either at work or in your leisure time.

Strength	How to Use It

