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Lifelong Learning

Are you really up to date?

So you say you are a lifelong learner? And you contend that you are current and not static on contemporary trends and practices? How do you know?

Consider this definition: Lifelong learners are constantly investigating, looking out for new thoughts and trends in their fields and in other fields. They are inquisitive by nature and take a liberal arts perspective of the world. They are vociferous readers, are as curious as cats and view life with lots of questions. They do not rush to judgment or give directions based on past experience. Instead, they see the fine differences in situations. They are very perceptive and creative.

Leadership in the healthcare field requires knowledge workers—those who are paid to analyze, think and reason. The rapid changes that occur in healthcare bring significant complexity. And the Internet gives patients, physicians and staff access to limitless quantities of information. This world essentially is a colossal network that is constantly in flux.

So, given this viewpoint, do you still contend you are a lifelong learner? How much of the above definition accurately describes you?

Leaders as Learners

A CEO once said, “There are two kinds of leaders—the ones (who)

simply have it on autopilot and the ones who are always watching for the signs around them. Give me the listeners and I will build a great team.”

Most people agree that success as a leader is tied to three factors: technical skills, administrative skills and leadership skills. A deep-rooted knowledge of the technical aspects of one’s job is necessary at the senior leadership level. For example, chief financial officers must know current financial practices and accounting standards; CEOs must be current on the legal aspects of running organizations; and chief medical officers must know the technical aspects of medical care organizations and medical staff. It is typically this first factor—technical skills—that is covered by most current adult education courses.

The second factor, administrative skills, requires a strong knowledge of and expertise in handling administrative duties, including using information technology effectively, running meetings, coordinating staff work and managing office operations.

It is the third factor, leadership skills, that often presents the most challenge in lifelong learning. And it is in this area that many individuals fail to develop a habit of learning.

The reality is that true lifelong learners, those who frequently use skills such as reasoning and judgment, as opposed to only technical skills targeted to a specific profession, are the standout leaders. These are the people who perform closest to their potential by adapting, adjusting, learning and finding new methods to improve their organizations and the lives of the people they serve. They are the ones who naturally bring creativity to their organizations.

It is not enough to simply attend an occasional workshop or seminar. Nor is it adequate to periodically skim the industry journals and magazines. How can you differentiate yourself from those who learn just enough new technical skills to get by in the world? To be a bona fide lifelong learner, you should consistently practice the following:

Make lifelong learning a priority.

Dedicate yourself to making a change in *how* you learn and *what* you learn. Be certain that, on a regular basis, you try something unique and different and discover new perspectives or master new disciplines. Consider starting tomorrow morning by setting aside the first half-hour of the day for some form of education.

Show curiosity for fields other than

your own. Pick up a journal or an article on a topic you are not familiar with. Visit a local business to see how it operates. Try to get appointed to a local bank board or another business’

governing body. Join the board of a nonprofit organization in your community. Get to know local business and civic leaders and learn what they do in their jobs.

Think by making connections.

Peter Drucker wrote, “To make knowledge productive we will have to learn to see both forest and tree. We will have to learn to connect.” Lifelong learners are masters at this skill. They see the lessons in one part of their life and relate them to the issues and problems they face in other parts of their life.

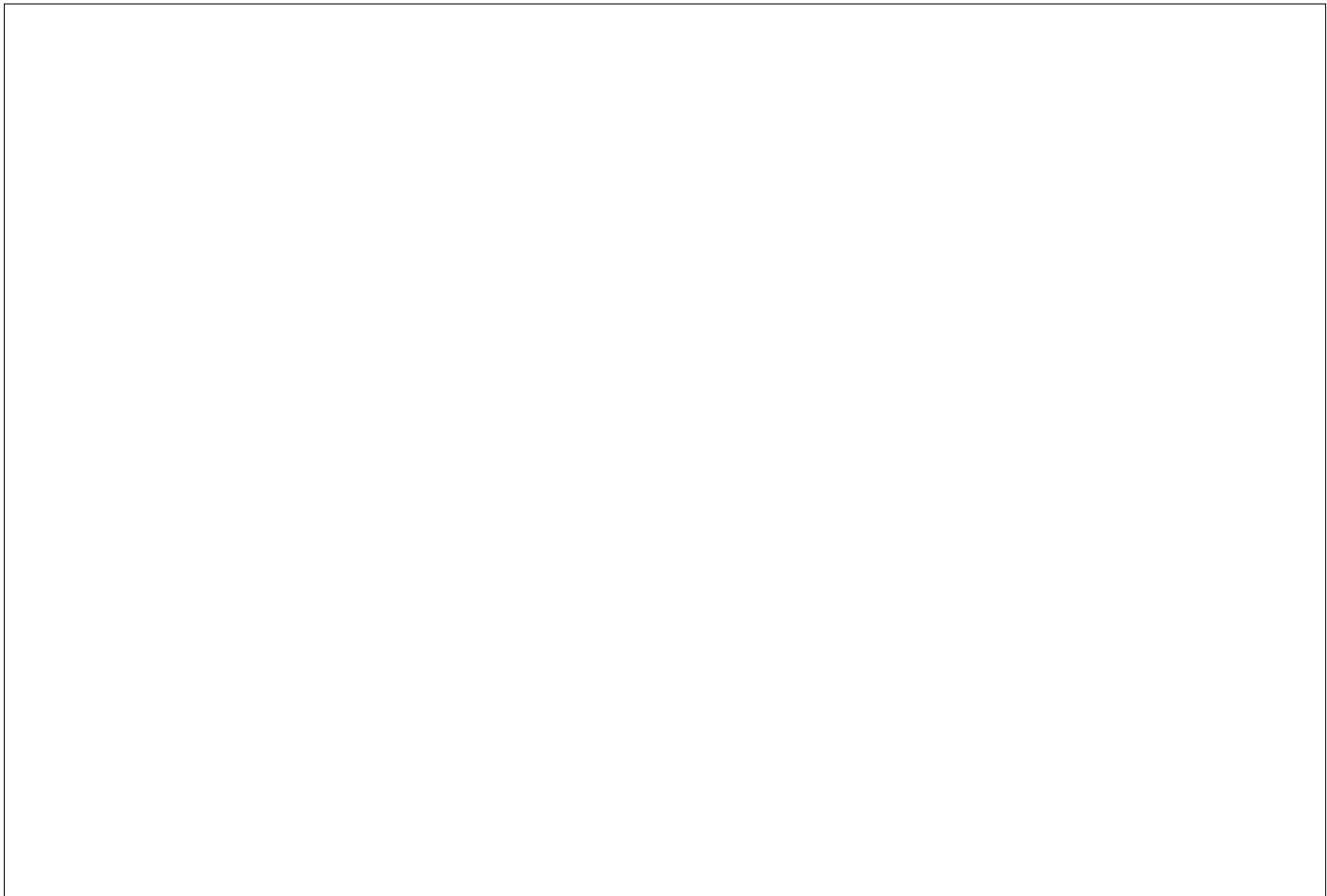
Curb your convictions; adopt a beginner’s way of reasoning. People who hold strong convictions often are not open to new ideas. Actively seek

out information that contradicts your view of the world. Seasoned leaders frequently approach problems the same way every time, often learn nothing or very little and occasionally make the wrong decision as a result. Conversely, beginners usually see the novelty in situations, and their focus is on trying to expand their expertise and knowledge. They have a greater awareness than the typical expert and, as a result, often recognize issues or discern red flags that an expert might miss.

Be more adaptable and cautious about heuristics. Many seasoned leaders use heuristics in their decision making. Heuristics are rules of thumb or mental shortcuts that lessen the intricacy, expense and time taken in making decisions. Without a doubt,

heuristics can be very helpful for leaders as they make their decisions. But learning requires change, and lifelong learners must be willing to adapt and change if they want to grow.

Always learn something fresh or unique. Lifelong learners seek new knowledge because it is part of what they naturally do. These are individuals who take music or dance lessons later in life just to try a new endeavor. They embark on a multiple-month study of some specific period of history. They make an in-depth historical visit to another country or go on an archaeological dig. They learn a new language. While lifelong learners may not become world experts in any of these areas, they make these efforts to gain new insights and wisdom and often



simply to exercise their brain. Many will say that doing these things is fun.

Develop a constant curiosity.

Lifelong learners approach much of life with the question, “why?” They are curious about all kinds of people, history, science, math, psychology, sociology and various types of information, both valuable and commonplace. Albert Einstein once said, “Questions are more important than answers.” People who exercise lifelong learning embrace diversity and enjoy learning new cultures and practices. Their curiosity adds to their intelligence, knowledge and point of view.

Learn in multiple ways. Have you ever listened to a podcast? Taken an online course? Engaged in mind mapping? Traditional education often means learning in a relatively limited number of ways, which leaves some people with a narrow view of learning—and often extremely bored. But there are many other ways of learning: through hands-on activity, storytelling or the many new applications on the Internet. Start a blog, read and comment on a blog, spend time on LinkedIn (or other social networks) and surf the Internet. Learn to use a new device, such as a netbook or an e-book reader.

Mentor and teach others. The healthcare field has a rich history of more seasoned leaders mentoring early careerists. You can take on a resident or fellow as a protégé; give junior leaders in your organization more access to you; or teach a course, either inside your organization or at a local university. Teaching a subject often leads you to understand the topic better yourself. Lifelong learners love to teach because

they know it helps them deepen their mastery of their own learning.

Exercise and relax. Adults, like children, need time to play and engage in physical activity as a way to rest from highly active learning. Don’t become so involved and active in learning that you neglect your physical and mental health.

Work for a learning organization.

Be certain that you work in an organization that supports lifelong learning and education. If your organization constantly cuts its education and travel budget, seek employment with one that sees the value and significance in learning. If you work for someone who does not give you support and intellectual autonomy, find a new boss. If your career seems limiting, find an activity that advances lifelong learning.

Be active in your professional organization. Lifelong learners in healthcare are active in the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE) and regularly attend local chapter meetings and chapter and national educational offerings. Much education takes place through informal interactions with others at these meetings and events.

Discipline and guide your learning. Simply learning additional information and knowledge is not enough. You must be able to see how it connects to other parts of your life, and you need to allow time to develop ideas on your own. You can do this by creating a journal or setting aside time to contemplate new concepts you have learned. Once again quoting Einstein, “Any man who reads too much and uses his

own brain too little falls into lazy habits of thinking.”

Try to implement some of these strategies in your own process of lifelong learning. You may find yourself enjoying your life and career more fully.

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Editor’s Note: The ACHE Healthcare Executive Competencies Assessment Tool is an ideal resource to check your skill level in a number of areas. The tool was mailed with the January/February issue of *Healthcare Executive* and is available at ache.org/Careers.