

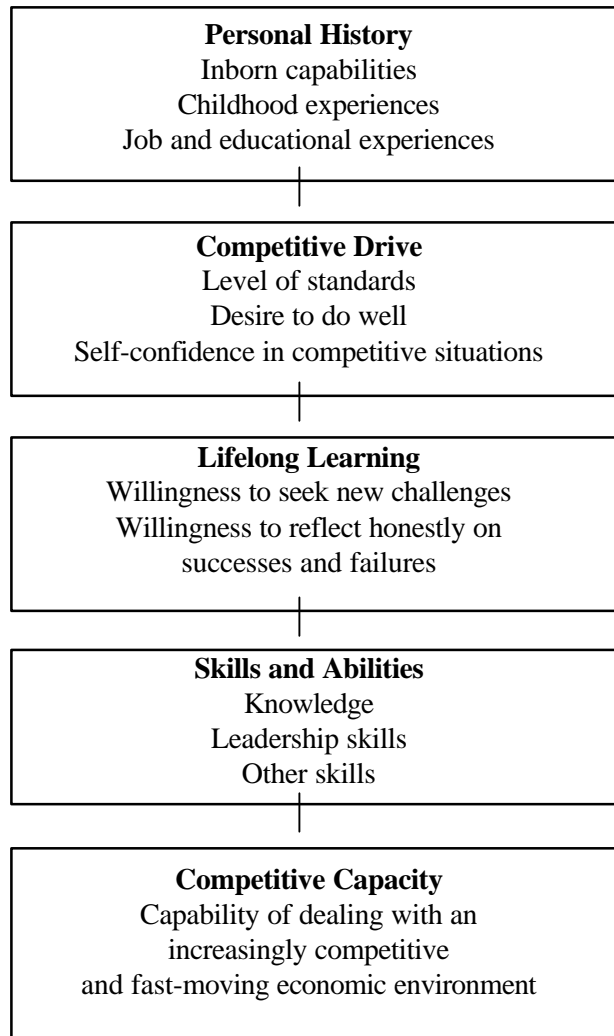
# Habits of Lifelong Learners

John P. Kotter in Leading Change (HBS Press, 1996)

In a static world, we can learn virtually everything we need to know in life by the time we are fifteen, and few of us are called on to provide leadership. In an ever changing world, we can never learn it all, even if we keep growing into our nineties, and the development of leadership skills becomes relevant to an ever-increasing number of people.

As the rate of change increases, the willingness and ability to keep developing become central to career success for individuals and to economic success for organizations. Some leaders often do not begin the race with the most money or intelligence, but they win nevertheless because they outgrow their rivals. They develop the capacity to handle a complex and changing business environment. They grow or become unusually competent in advancing organizational transformation. They learn to be leaders.

## The Relationship of Lifelong Learning, Leadership Skills and the Capacity to Succeed in the Future



## **The Habits of Lifelong Learners**

The habits of lifelong learners are relatively simple. Lifelong learners take risks. More than others, these men and women push themselves out of their comfort zones and try new ideas. While most of us become set in our ways, they keep experimenting.

Risk taking inevitably produces both bigger successes and bigger failures. Much more than most of us, lifelong learners humbly and honestly reflect on their experiences to educate themselves. They don't sweep failure under the rug or examine it from a defensive position that undermines their ability to make rational conclusions.

Lifelong learners actively solicit opinions and ideas from others. They don't make the assumption that they know it all or that most other people have little to contribute. Just the opposite, they believe that with the right approach, they can learn from anyone under almost any circumstance.

Much more than the average person, lifelong learners also listen carefully, and they do so with an open mind. They don't assume that listening will produce big ideas or important information very often. Quite contrary, but they know that careful listening will help give them accurate feedback on the effect of their actions. And without honest feedback, learning becomes almost impossible.

## **Mental Habits Support Lifelong Learning**

Risk Taking: Willingness to push oneself out of comfort zones

Humble self-reflection: Honest assessment of successes and failures, especially the latter

Solicitation of opinions: Aggressive collection of information and ideas from others

Careful listening: Propensity to listen to others

Openness to new ideas: Willingness to view life with an open mind

If these habits are so simple, why don't more of us develop them? Because in the short term, it's more painful. Risk taking brings failure as well as success. Honest reflection, listening, solicitation of opinions, and openness bring bad news and negative feedback as well as interesting ideas. In the short term, life is generally more pleasant without failure and negative feedback.

Lifelong learners overcome a natural human tendency to shy away from or abandon habits that produce short-term pain. By surviving difficult experiences, they build up a certain immunity to hardship. With clarity of thought, they come to realize the importance of both these habits and lifelong learning. But most of all, their goals and aspirations facilitate the development of humility, openness, willingness to take risks, and the capacity to listen.

The very best lifelong learners and leaders I've known seem to have high standards, ambitious goals, and a real sense of mission in their lives. Such goals and aspirations spur them on, put their accomplishments in a humbling perspective, and help them endure the short-term pain associated with growth. Sometimes this sense of mission is developed early in life, sometimes later in adulthood, often a combination of the two. Whatever the case, their aspirations help keep them from sliding into a comfortable, safe routine characterized by little sensible risk taking, a relatively closed mind, a minimum of reaching out, and little listening.

Just as a challenging vision can help an organization to adapt to shifting conditions, nothing seems to support the habits promote personal growth more than ambitious, humanistic goals.