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Some Uses of Experience

WE SPEND much of our lives getting ready for something. The something may happen tomorrow, like passing examinations, or it may happen five years from now, like taking over a new job.

We have two principal ways of preparing: by study and by experience. Some people think that experience costs too much in time and effort, others believe that book learning is superior, while others find experience a too tedious process.

In its simplest terms what we seek is this: to have familiar factors to put into the equation we have to solve. In algebra and chemistry these factors are the knowns. Only through knowledge of the knowns can you find the unknowns. In everyday affairs the knowns are the memories of experiences.

What does a quarter-back at a football game do when he is walking back to his huddle? He draws on his experience of past games and his experience of the players on his team and his knowledge of the opposing team, and then, after working out an equation based on facts of the past and the present, he reaches a decision about the play to call.

The doctor uses experience when he adapts a certain form of treatment to your case. The research chemist uses it when he draws upon his knowledge of past experiments. The mechanic applies his knowledge of putting a machine together. The business executive looks at charts of past years so as to assess the present prospects of his business. Our laws exist because experience has shown us that they work.

We can get into more trouble by ignoring the lessons of experience than in almost any other way.

The value of employees to an industry or an office is largely measured by their experience in that organization. Every firm has its own way of doing things. No worker can be efficient until he has learned the ropes. He cannot be given responsibility until he has qualified his knowledge by experience.

When Captain R. M. Ellis, aboard H.M.S. *Suffolk*, shadowed the *Bismarck* toward her doom in 1941, his success was not wholly due to radar, but rather to his diligence in getting personal experience with that new device. Says the historian: "The trouble he had taken to instruct himself in the subject was to have a noteworthy reward."

When we say that experience is a valuable asset in business and in the other activities of life we do not mean just casual acquaintance with events as they pass by. Experience is useful only if you have the capacity to learn from it and to apply the lesson to the constructive benefit of yourself and the business.

The executive's experience

The biggest jump a person makes in his business career is the jump from doing a good individual job to the supervision of people. Many who take that jump successfully have not learned much theory. They are men who gained their diplomas *cum laude* from the College of Experience.

A young man who has set his sights on a managerial post should keep in mind the difference between — as the editors of *Fortune* put it in their book *The Executive Life* — "being a manager with broad experience — period — and being a manager whose broad experience has developed his judgment." It is broad judgment that top management is after, and not simply a man with a load of varied technical or professional knowledge he has learned but not yet applied.

When an expert is called in to get a stalled machine operating, he may charge \$100, of which five cents is for turning a screw and the balance is for his lifetime of experience that taught him what screw to turn.

Experience is a great support when one is called upon to lay down a stake, as is required of the executive every day.

In discussing the causes of business failures in Canada in 1955, a Dun and Bradstreet study shows the biggest

cause to be "lack of managerial experience." This accounted for 39.4 per cent of the 1955 total of failures. The next biggest percentage (29.8) was due to "unbalanced experience", described as experience not well rounded in sales, finance, purchasing and production. Then followed "incompetence" with 21.3 per cent of failures. Altogether, lack of experience or incompetence accounted for 96.7 per cent of the total failures.

Trial and error

Problems are solved in many situations by trial and error, but not if the trials are made in a bull-headed way. Trial and error efforts must have some content of intelligence, a pattern. Random efforts have no more chance of success than those of a fly beating its head against a pane of glass.

"Let's try it and see what will happen" is one of the main streets of scientific experiment. It is a way of getting experience in many other activities besides science. Farming, cooking, manufacturing, weather predicting, and construction, for example, depend on the records of the trials, errors and successes of distant days and yesterday.

Edward Hodnett tells us in *The Art of Problem Solving* (Harper & Bros. 1955) that the fastest and best method of finding the answer to a simple problem is often through trial and error. He adds facetiously, however, that this axiom is disputed by many women, who think talking about it is more interesting, and by many men, who think they should refer it to a committee.

The gaining of experience by trial and error is not universally useful. It can be wasteful of time and energy. A paramecium, one of the most humble creations found in ponds, has no specialized sense organs, but progresses by avoiding reaction. It butts into an obstacle, backs up, changes direction, and tries again. It finds its way simply by keeping out of trouble.

The young man trying to get on in the world will have a most unhappy time if he tries to depend wholly upon such trial and error ways.

Man is the only animal that ever combined curiosity with experience and made the combination pay continuous dividends. He seeks to understand things that he has to back away from. He observes, builds a possible explanation, forms a plan, and tries it out.

Some people think of Galileo's experiment in dropping things from the leaning tower of Pisa as merely an experiment in physics, but that is not its great significance. What he demonstrated was a new problem-solving method based on observation and experience.

Observation provides facts on which our intelligence may work. To observe successfully we must train ourselves to pay attention to details, seeing the

apparently unimportant as well as the clearly important facts, the uninteresting as well as the interesting, the obscure and the strange as well as the obvious and the familiar.

Other people's experience

If we depended upon our own personal experience for our learning, we should find ourselves with scanty knowledge, thin in some places and utterly lacking elsewhere. The ambitious person says "Out of whose book can I take a leaf?" and he proceeds to make the experience of other people an extension of his own.

Some men are never convinced that they know a thing unless they have experienced it. They are rather pitiable in their refusal to listen to anyone but themselves; like an obstinate ship's captain who has to learn by many wrecks how to avoid the rocks.

Other men and women, some much wiser than we are and others perhaps just as deficient in skills, sought solutions to similar problems last week or a thousand years ago. We can use their experience by proxy, as it were.

No scientist and no business man can begin a project with assurance of success unless he knows what has already been done.

How do we tap the accumulated experience of mankind? Merely reading the biographies of great men will not make us great. They have set up guide-posts and warning signs, and they have even erected signs that draw our attention to pleasant views and exciting prospects. But we must step out on the highway, learning not only to see but to interpret in terms of our own life the experiences about which they tell us. To take a trustworthy record from the past and adapt it to solution of a present problem: that is truly making the experience of other people our own.

Breadth of view

If you are called upon to solve different kinds of problems, your experience must be broad. The workman and the executive who have had years of acquaintance with their work find that they come again and again upon their own footprints. The footprints may not be the same size as the shoes they wear now. The knowledge of individual situations they had ten years ago has broadened out into knowledge of principles. These are guides in similar and related situations today.

What is the difference between narrow experience and broad experience in their effect upon one's opportunity for advancement in one's job? The first may make one an expert in a routine job, but it may not qualify one for a better job. The second does two vital things: it multiplies one's sources of inspiration and it enables one to trace cause and effect.

The reason that crack salesmen change into cracked-up executives, says Hodnett, is that their early experience in solving certain kinds of problems successfully is too narrow to be transferable to the kinds that face them in their later positions.

Not every problem has been precisely duplicated in the past, but having part of the solution in hand leaves your mind free to apply all its energy to the part of the problem that is different.

One thing that will not change is a principle. By distilling principles from our experiences we are building the essentials of future progress and solutions.

No person should attempt to be original until experience has taught him what is usual and normal. Originality is deviation from the accustomed. First, you have the regular, the routine, in which you are expert. Then, by intuition or directed thought you get an idea for improvement.

Choosing experiences

Just as progress in becoming a skilled machinist consists largely in eliminating useless motions, so we must learn that some experiences should be passed by. They are neither harmful nor beneficial, and are therefore of no consequence to us. They would cause a jumble in our minds, like the clutter of an attic store-room.

Negative experiences are nevertheless significant. One of his co-workers remarked to Edison about the tediousness of an experiment: "It's too bad to do all of that work for nothing." To this the inventor replied: "But it's not for nothing. We have got a lot of good results. Look now, we know 700 things that won't work."

Besides screening experiences for outright discard or acceptance, we can decide that some shall be merely sampled. It is not necessary to experience all of an event in order to judge whether it is good or bad, desirable or not. You do not put all of a dress-length of cloth into a bath-tub to find whether the colours are washable. You put a small piece of it into a basin. If the colours in the sample do not run, the colours in that piece of cloth are fast. But make sure that the sample is truly representative and that the test is carefully made.

Our chosen experiences, whether complete or partial, may cause us dismay or pain. We are likely to mourn over the fact that our experiences are mostly of adversity, but we should not do so. Men and women who have become great in industry, the arts, and politics tell us that their ability to cope with crises today arose out of the experience they gained while wrestling with adverse circumstances in their early years. Said one man: I've had two or three painful kicks in my business life, but every one woke me up and a couple helped me upstairs.

Of one thing be sure: it is not an evidence of maturity to throw down the tools of an experiment in disgust when first efforts show they do not work.

Robert P. Crawford says in *The Techniques of Creative Thinking* (Hawthorne Books Inc., 1954): "I have known many individuals who have lost positions or suffered bankruptcy and who have immediately started out on new work so successfully that they look back on the events of the past as having been the best things that could possibly have happened to them."

Putting experience to use

Using experience involves the association of ideas. Every new thing is related to knowledge we already have.

By gathering experiences with eagerness, sorting them into categories, and welding them together with our own thought, we may be led, and often are led, to stand on the brink of great possibilities.

And let no person with ambition to succeed in business think that he can skip this process. Do not believe that because you are exceedingly clever as a stock keeper you will automatically make a good purchasing agent, or that your years behind a counter will make you a good branch manager, or that because you are a crack mechanic you are sure to be made foreman.

Experience is essential in all these, but the man who progresses needs to add something more. He uses his experience, to be sure, but he is constantly deepening it by observing and learning and reaching out beyond it. If he is a clerk, he may be studying book-keeping; if he is a book-keeper he may be studying costing; if he is a machine tender he may be studying how to manage people.

Experience is not wisdom, but material for thinking with. It is always prompting the alert man to ask questions. Every parent is embarrassed by the natural bent of his young children to ask "why?" Yet if we were to continue to ask "why?" of every experience we should approach nearer to wisdom with every passing year. Learning is the most pleasant of all experiences, not only for philosophers and professors, but for the rest of mankind as well.

The man who has won a mile race, or come first in a golf tournament, or pitched a shut-out in baseball, spent some time in getting the hang of it. The juggler who keeps six balls in the air while standing on a tight-rope puts in long hours of practice. The executive who handles in a forenoon a mountain of mail, a torrent of telephone calls, a spate of visitors, and a constant stream of subordinates seeking instructions: he does it with apparent ease because he is experienced in it. Leonardo Da Vinci, whose eminent position in art is unques-

tioned, would draw a hundred sketches of an animal from observation before turning to his picture to fix it there for all time.

Action is needed

Merely to experience a need is not much of an advance. A man may experience the need for a glossy but not slippery bath-tub, but unless he makes one he has not put his experience to use. What a man gets as the result of his experience is what he earns by putting that experience into service.

A man must put himself forward. At the Olympic games it is not the finest and strongest men in the world who are crowned, but they who enter the contests. Out of our experiences we choose something to be or something to do: then we must proceed to be or to do, to risk our convictions in an act.

Alas! some persons are satisfied to talk about their experiences. Others bypass the hardship of experience for the soft road of superstition and luck. They follow their stars, they say. They sacrifice their human qualities of searching and finding, of trying and succeeding, of imagining and realizing: they sacrifice all these for a will-o'-the-wisp, seldom reaching the height of achievement that it was in their power to attain.

A man must show ability if he is to earn promotion. Is he ready for a more important job?

If a survey of your present state of education and experience shows a deficiency in view of your goal, what can you do? You may get acquainted with people whose knowledge you can use as an extension of your experience. You may join a trade or other association which devotes itself to study and solution of the problems in your line of business. You may enrol for a course of study in an evening school. You may lay out for yourself a course of reading, so as to learn from the experience of the past.

Above all, avoid the dangerous opinion that you know enough. The wise man who is ambitious is always studying the next job ahead so as to be ready for it when the chance offers.

Flight into fancy

A few years of schooling will put a young man in possession of more mathematics than Newton had, but does this make him a Newton? All it does is give him a spring-board.

His imagination, feasting on the wealth of fundamental facts gathered through the ages, must soar above the ordinary routine of life, find questions to be answered, probe the secrets of unexplained things, build hypotheses to be challenged and proven, or invent systems or machines that contribute to business progress.

No man of feeble imagination ever became a great business executive, but every great business executive based his imagination on all he could find out of the past and his own experience.

Not to test what is said and taught is weakness, so let us try out the truth of what has been said by working an exercise in applied imagination. As Leonardo told us, when you look at a wall spotted with stains, if you are about to devise some scene, you will be able to see in the random marks a resemblance to various landscapes adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees and valleys; or you may see battles and figures in action, and an infinite number of things which you can then reduce into separate and well-drawn forms.

Here are some ideas, spots on a wall, that any person may experiment with according to the principles discussed. They are taken from *Applied Imagination* by Dr. Alex F. Osborn (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), where you may find about 150 other similar exercises. Adapt these to your own business or interests. What solutions of downtown parking problems can you suggest? Name all possible uses for a common brick. Write down three of your "pet peeves" along with creative suggestions as to how they might be alleviated. Select the career that appeals to you most, and list ten points by way of qualifications which might appeal to a prospective employer. Think up ten ways to entertain yourself when alone for an entire evening. You are the minister of a church where attendance of young people is dwindling: describe at least six things you might do to correct this trend.

Why do people fail or succeed?

People fail because they have not realized through experience all that they are capable of doing. Young men who ignore the lessons of experience lose themselves in the crowd. Others find ignorance and in-curiosity a soft and easy pillow.

Most of us know that the life of a workman who does not apply his experience to betterment of his job can become unspeakably sad and barren or coarse and frivolous. The only boast to which such a life can give birth is that of an ancient Greek who was pictured by Socrates as seeking public office on the platform that he had never learned anything from anyone.

To a successful man, or to the person headed for success, experience achieved by industry and perfected by time is a positive benefit. He knows that what he is to be he is now becoming.

The man who has taken care to gain wide experience can take hold anywhere, he can meet any opportunity with his chin up. That, indeed, has been the experience of great men in every age. Kings, philosophers and top men in every line of activity have gone to this school, and have come away with the sense of power that arises from the confidence that they are masters of their jobs.