

Your learning journey...every little helps!

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Many years ago I was given some really powerful advice. During a conversation centred on how best to truly manage your own development, I heard the words 'learning is an iterative process'. I nodded as is customary when something so truly significant is mentioned. The trouble was, I didn't know what it meant, so I checked the word out, and I did so again for the purpose of this blog...

"An iterative procedure is one in which repetition of a sequence of operations yields results successively closer to a desired result"

Source: Webster-Miriam dictionary

Ah, the light in my too dim head came on straight away, and I saw then the power of this word as a guiding principle in terms of how best to genuinely learn from everyday experiences.

Stick with me for three minutes, and I will explain how the 'iterative word' has really helped me to drive my own learning.

I feel we need to see more value in small, incremental steps in our unique learning journey, and resist the seductive temptations of unsustainably larger movements that typically cost a lot and result long term in far too little to justify time and cost. Think of your learning as being like an onion skin – countless seemingly insignificantly tiny layers that build and work together to create a solid, rather tasty structure.

If we are to move nearer to a desired result it is essential to have some clarity about what the 'desired result' looks like, or our efforts to learn will lack focus and direction.

To learn iteratively we need to develop an appetite for persistence, and to revisit events and experiences that may not be the highlight of our days. It is normal to avoid the nasty stuff and dwell on what makes us feel good about ourselves, and that will work to a point. To make serious movement in our self-driven development, it is necessary to build the capability to review the less pleasant experiences, and in small steps, build the knowledge and behaviours that will mean less repeats of mistakes and errors.

An iterative learning journey requires realism and an ability to see setbacks and even failure as genuine opportunities to progress towards difficult goals. We rarely achieve an ultimately acceptable or 'best' result in one go, so be prepared rethink, reinvent, and recreate until, in small steps, a better, if not best solution is found...then reworked.

Nothing stands still in our lives – work or domestic, and if we allow our learning to do so, this will not keep up with the demands of the world in which we live. Thus what was working five years, five months, or even five hours ago may well need to be reshaped, replaced or reworked. Let's be honest here, this means the iterative learner is faced with tasks that are not always exciting, provide instant gratification, or immediate results. This is accepted as an important element in a journey that is worth the hard work.

The iterative learner is comfortable with reflection on practice that yields insights and alternatives that in turn lead slowly, sometimes agonising slowly, to better solutions, and closer to 'a desired result'. Let's not pretend this is easy, if it were the world would not be full of 'passive participants' sat in rows in training courses being told things as a group, not each of them putting in the hard yards that a real self-driven development effort requires.

None of this suits the current typical 'hurry up' workplace that values activity over productivity, and that rewards doing things, anything, over reflection, thinking and planning. In a world of work that in the foreseeable future requires much more to be done with far less people, budget and time, the iterative learner's path will seem at odds with a work environment that wants short term results now, preferring long leaps over shuffling, however unlikely a long term change for better.

Well, for me the typical current workplace is rarely impressive in terms of the way it manages people, or any other scarce resource, and all too often fails to impress in results or the way these are achieved.

Thus the iterative learner well may stand apart from the norm, which in my view is no bad thing, knowing that movements that don't impress the 'I want it all and I want it now' management style of so many are enough for them, and that steady, movements with strong foundations and clarity of direction will achieve more than doomed, hasty, apparently impressive, over-ambitious leaps for effect.

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