

Are You a Lifelong Learner?

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Are you teachable or do you have it all figured out? The answer to this question could have a direct impact on your success and the success of your company. When you study the lives of effective leaders, there is a common thread of a thirst for learning. These leaders are continually seeking out new ideas, gaining feedback, and exploring innovative ways of tackling challenges.

Hall of Fame basketball coach John Wooden said, "It's what you learn after you know it all that counts," and "If I am through learning, I am through." Similarly, McDonald's founder Ray Kroc stated, "As long as you're green, you're growing. As soon as you're ripe, you start to rot." These quotes by leaders from sports and business illustrate the value and belief in learning as a lifelong endeavor. From the modern study of neuroscience, we know that the brain is hardwired to resist change. Further, most of us are only open to feedback if it is positive. However, true learners push through to embrace change and find kernels of truth even from their harshest critics.

J.L. Holloway is one of Mississippi's most successful entrepreneurs and a committed lifelong learner. At age 38, Holloway founded HAM Marine and through growth and acquisitions grew the business, later called Freide Goldman, to be a publicly traded company with a market capitalization of \$2 billion and over 12,000 employees worldwide. BusinessWeek in a cover article named Freide Goldman the "Best Managed Company in America." In 2002 after almost twenty years building the business, Holloway stepped aside and founded Tenax, LLC, a private equity investment group, which invests and operates a diverse portfolio of businesses. His commitment to excellence has led to him being named the Governor's Citizen of the Year and to the Mississippi Business Hall of Fame.

Holloway emphasized the importance of having the right people in the right jobs. He noted the key attributes of the right people are those that: (i) share a commitment to hard work, (ii) have a passion for their job, and (iii) display an eagerness to seek advice and learn. Holloway acknowledged that, "I continue to learn new things about business all the time." Now in his fourth decade as a businessman, he continues to live out what he expects from his teams – a teachable spirit and a hunger for finding new ways to solve business challenges.

Noted business author and consultant Peter Senge in his book *The Fifth Discipline* and related writings has led the call for organizations to embrace learning as a core part of the culture and become what is known as a "learning organization." He believes that competing in a global economy requires not just individuals, but entire organizations, to be committed to growth through learning. Senge notes that continuous learners: (1) recognize their own priorities and values, (2) continue to reflect on their life and business experiences, (3) seek ongoing feedback, (4) remain as open as possible to the feedback, and (5) make ongoing adjustments based on the ongoing feedback.

To truly be a continuous learner takes humility and courage. Also, I find that one of the greatest challenges to being a continuous learner today is the speed of life. Between constant texts, emails, and calls, it leaves little time for self-reflection, contemplation, and analysis. The leaders I study somehow step back from the noise and harness the power that comes from "thinking" time. Leaders like Holloway point us toward the value of making learning a top priority and a lifetime commitment.

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