



# SELF-COACHING GUIDE #5: LEARNING

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**A Note on Links:** In digital copies of this document, all the links [underlined in blue](#) are live, and clicking them while holding down the CTRL key should launch your browser. If you're holding a printed version or if your browser doesn't launch, please visit [www.edbatista.com](http://www.edbatista.com).

## 1. Three Things You (Probably) Won't Learn in Business School

I learned a hell of a lot in business school, but it wasn't until after I graduated that I fully realized how much I still didn't know. I'm not blaming Stanford in the least--they did the best they could with me--but one of the reasons I find my current work with MBA students so gratifying is that I'm helping them explore topics that will allow them be better prepared after graduation than I was.

I recently had a chance to talk with [Corey Ford](#), a former GSB student and current lecturer and Fellow at Stanford's Institute of Design (better known as the "d.school.") We talked extensively about what he'd learned in business school, but I also asked him about what he *didn't* learn.

His answers resonated with me--I had the same gaps in my knowledge 10 years ago. And despite the substantial innovations in the GSB's new curriculum, particularly its emphasis on experiential learning and leadership development, I don't know that we'll be teaching these lessons to our current students, either--perhaps because they're best learned *after* graduation. **With big thanks to Corey for providing this framework**, here are three lessons you (probably) won't learn in b-school:

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### 1. Business school will help you get from point B to point Z.



**But finding point A is up to you.**

[www.edbatista.com/2009/01/b-school.html](http://www.edbatista.com/2009/01/b-school.html)

Business school definitely helped me learn to get things done more effectively. I tackled so many academic and extracurricular projects in such a short amount of time, working alongside classmates who were so sharp and productive, that I had to bring my "A" game every day, and my game inevitably improved. But although the experience left me far better prepared to get things done--to get to "point Z," in Corey's phrase--it didn't necessarily help me find "point A," the right place to get

started.

At a macro level, this means that business school isn't a particularly good place to "find yourself" or to reflect on your life path. Business school is a **great** place to find a job in almost any field or to take your career in an entirely new direction, and I found that a wealth of resources at Stanford, from the Career Management Center to the Center for Social Innovation to an amazing network of alumni, were available to help me get from point B to point Z. But it was still up to me to pick the point A where I wanted to get started.

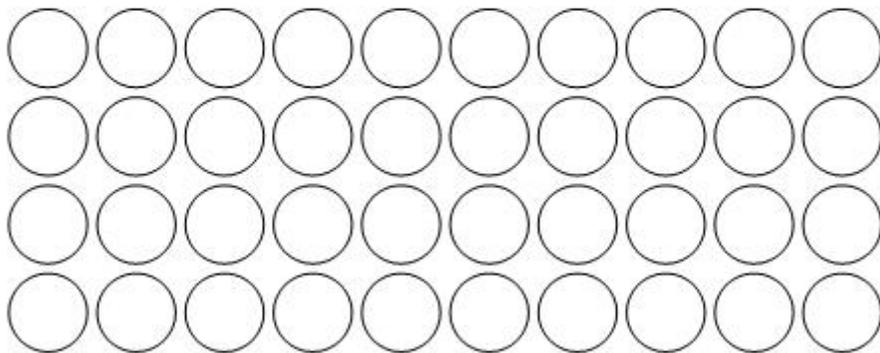
I'm not suggesting that before you enter business school you need to know exactly what you're going to do after graduation, but whenever I talk to prospective MBAs, I encourage them to spend a lot of time thinking in advance about why they want the degree and what they expect to do with it.

And at a micro level, this means that the pace and intensity of b-school (and the related skills that you develop) can result in rapid venture-creation, problem-solving or project management processes that propel you quickly down a path toward point Z before you're sure that you've started in the right place.

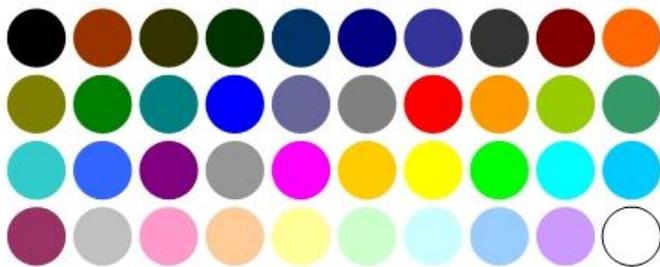
Rather than focusing immediately on answering the question, "*How can we do this more effectively?*," it may be more useful to engage in a little [double-loop learning](#) and ask "*Is this the right thing to do in the first place?*" and "*What assumptions should be challenged before we proceed?*" (A lesson I've had to re-learn on occasion.)

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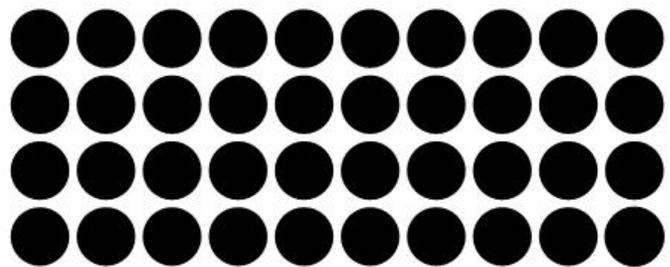
## 2. Business schools are often highly diverse places...



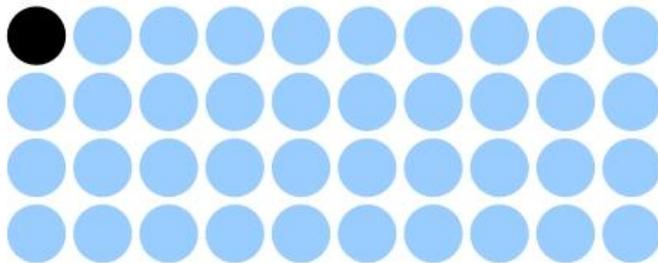
...where you'll work with a wide range of people...



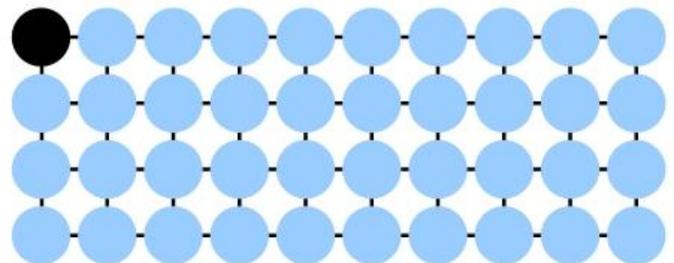
...who are all MBAs.



But after graduation you may be the only MBA around...



...and you'll have to think about diversity in new ways to connect with new colleagues.



[www.edbatista.com/2009/01/b-school.html](http://www.edbatista.com/2009/01/b-school.html)

After graduating from the GSB I became the first Executive Director of the [Nonprofit Technology Network](#) (NTEN) a new organization dedicated to helping the nonprofit sector make more effective use of technology. I led NTEN for four years--it was an incredible experience, and I'm really proud of what we accomplished--but at times I made things harder for myself because I didn't see how being surrounded by MBAs for two years had affected how I worked with others.

Although b-schools can be perceived as lacking in diversity, in my experience MBAs are actually an extremely diverse group, with the important caveat that only 35-40% of the students are women (in contrast to most other graduate programs, in which the majority of students are now women.) And gender balance aside, as a student I learned a great deal about working with people from different cultures, industries and personal backgrounds.

But ultimately *all these people were MBAs*, and although it's difficult to generalize about that group as a whole, I found that my classmates' competitiveness and drive served to enhance those qualities in myself, and, and while that allowed me to get a lot accomplished as a leader after graduation, it also had a downside.

When I encountered difficulties or ran into conflicts--inevitable when building a new organization that served a wide range of stakeholders--I often saw issues in zero-sum, win/lose terms--and I felt that my effectiveness as a leader was contingent on my ability to push forward and surmount opposition. I was good at driving projects toward completion, but in the process others could feel stifled or experience me as inflexible. I don't want to overstate the case--I believe I was ultimately an effective community-builder--but it would have been an easier process if I'd been more aware of this dynamic.

Corey has observed similar processes in his work at the d.school, where students from different graduate programs work in teams. The MBAs come in with strong group development and interpersonal skills that allow them to step into leadership roles, but they can sometimes overuse these strengths and be **too** influential, preventing others from feeling fully heard.

I do think that the GSB's new curriculum will help students be better prepared to cope with this dynamic, but you're still going to have to experience for yourself what it means to go from an all-MBA environment to one in which you may be the only person with that background and training. *How will you differ from your new colleagues or clients? How will those differences help you achieve your goals? And how might those differences get in the way?*

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### 3. And finally...



**...fail faster.**

Getting my MBA was a valuable experience. I learned a lot, the degree's been a helpful line on the resume, and I've benefited greatly as a member of the GSB's alumni network (a debt I gladly repay at every opportunity). But unlike a JD or an MD, you don't *need* an MBA in to pursue any particular career path. They're important

assets in many cases, but rarely actual prerequisites. (And sources from [BusinessWeek](#) to [20 CEOs and other experts](#) believe MBAs are overrated. Hell, even [MBA drop-outs](#) can make it big.)

So even though MBAs tend to be competitive and driven, in my experience they also tend to be risk-averse. Going to b-school is a diversification strategy, a way to expand one's options--and a way to delay committing to any particular path. This combination of competition and risk-aversion creates an environment in which our typical reluctance to make mistakes is heightened out of all proportion to the actual costs of those mistakes. So MBAs tend to put a high value on "doing it right" and avoid failure like the Black Plague. This establishes a "floor" under our losses, but it also creates a "ceiling" over our accomplishments. Success is never certain in any meaningful endeavor, and the more risk you can tolerate, the more you can potentially accomplish.

A lot of the coaching work I do with students involves helping them increase their risk-tolerance in interpersonal situations. We experiment with greater candor and directness, we test our intuitions and hunches, and we explore how we might accomplish our goals more effectively. And at every stage, we fail. But each time we fail, there's something to be learned from the experience--and the most important lesson is how often we mistakenly inflate the costs of failure.

Corey also sees elements of this in his work at the d.school, where "*Fail faster, succeed sooner*"--attributed to IDEO's David Kelley--is a mantra of the rapid prototyping methodology that's integral to any contemporary design process. As [David Bradford says](#), "*Failure is inevitable, and what's important is how you handle it, not how you avoid it.*"

Original Post: <http://www.edbatista.com/2009/01/b-school.html>

## 2. Experiential Learning Cycles

According to [Roger Greenaway](#), an experiential learning cycle is "a structured learning sequence which is guided by a cyclical model." The concept comes up regularly in my work involving leadership and interpersonal skills development at Stanford's Graduate School of Business and is a central component of our "Leadership Labs," a series of experiential learning activities that are now part of the school's mandatory core curriculum.

The primary model we use is a 4-stage cycle derived from [David Kolb's learning styles model](#): **Act, Reflect, Conceptualize, Apply**.

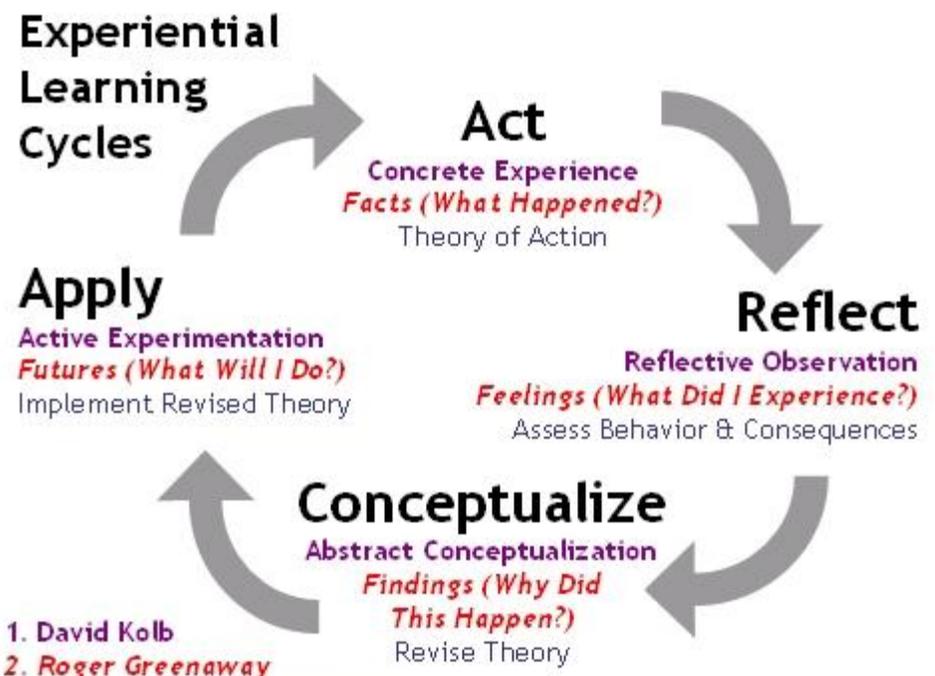
**ACT:** Do something--anything, in fact. Run a meeting, give a presentation, have a difficult conversation. (One of the most valuable aspects of this model is the way in which it allows us to turn every experience into a learning opportunity. The challenge, of course, is that we rarely complete the cycle and leave most potential learning untapped.)

**REFLECT:** Look back on your experience and assess the results. Determine what happened, what went well and what didn't.

**CONCEPTUALIZE:** Make sense of your experience. Seek to understand *why* things turned out as they did. Draw some conclusions and make some hypotheses.

**APPLY:** Put those hypotheses to the test. Don't simply *re-act*. Instead, have a conscious plan to do things differently to be more effective. And begin the cycle again.

My colleague [Andrea Corney](#) has noted the parallels between the experiential learning cycle as we typically define it (based on Kolb's work), and Roger Greenaway's [Active Reviewing Cycle](#) and Chris Argyris and David Schon's work on [Theories of Action](#). These models aren't identical, but they're similar enough that they can be overlaid on a 4-stage cycle. I found Andrea's sketch so helpful that I turned it into the graphic at right.



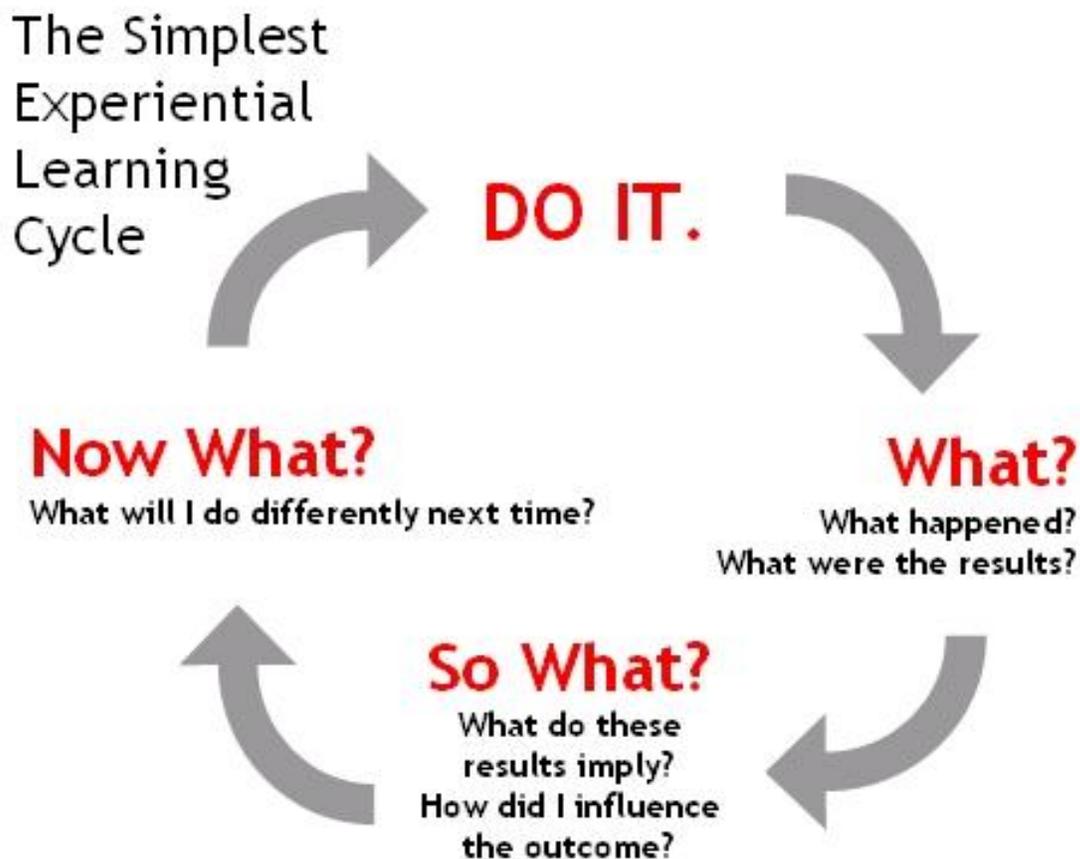
compiled by Andrea Corney

[www.edbatista.com/2007/10/experiential.html](http://www.edbatista.com/2007/10/experiential.html)

(Here's [a larger version](#), and here's a [2-slide PowerPoint file](#) of both graphics in this post.)

But the value of these models isn't in their conceptual elegance--it's in their ability to help you be more effective in the world. Applying them shouldn't be a time-consuming or difficult process, and in some cases it may involve nothing more than a few moments of thought after an experience and prior to its repetition. In other cases, you may want to use more formal methods to complete the cycle, such as keeping a journal, or holding feedback sessions with colleagues--whatever works best for you. The point is to recognize how much can be learned from our every experience and interaction, and to begin to capture more of that learning on a consistent basis.

**UPDATE:** Andrea reminds me of an even simpler version of the experiential learning cycle that essentially underlies the more complex ones above (here's [a larger version](#) of the graphic below):



compiled by Andrea Corney  
[www.edbatista.com/2007/10/experiential.html](http://www.edbatista.com/2007/10/experiential.html)

Original Post: <http://www.edbatista.com/2007/10/experiential.html>

### 3. The Value of Journal Writing

Most of the work I do as an executive coach (particularly at Stanford) involves asking clients and students to keep a journal. In some cases this is a structured (and graded!) class assignment, and several times a year my academic duties include reading and commenting on students' journals while they're taking our experiential "Interpersonal Dynamics" class. But even if someone's journal is just a series of informal, private notes, the purpose is to insure that the learning doesn't stop at the end of the coaching session or the class exercise.



My empirical experience as a journal-reader, as a coach working with journal-writers, and as an occasional journal-keeper myself has convinced me of the value of this practice, and this fits with my conceptual understanding of [experiential learning cycles](#). But I'm still left wondering why it actually works: *What are the underlying processes that make journal writing a meaningful activity?*

The work of neuroscientist [Joseph Ledoux](#) suggests some answers. Ledoux's work has focused on memory, emotions and cognition, and he [talked about memory](#) with the Edge "World Question Center":

Like many scientists in the field of memory, I used to think that a memory is something stored in the brain and then accessed when used. Then, in 2000, a researcher in my lab, Karim Nader, did an experiment that convinced me, and many others, that our usual way of thinking was wrong. In a nutshell, what Karim showed was that each time a memory is used, it has to be restored as a new memory in order to be accessible later. The old memory is either not there or is inaccessible. In short, your memory about something is only as good as your last memory about it.

So journaling 1) compels us to access our memories of an experience, 2) creates another, more recent memory of that experience, and 3) creates a physical record of those memories to which we can return in the future.

But Ledoux's work on emotion and cognition suggests an even more powerful reason for the value of journaling. A key theme for Ledoux is the distinction between emotional memories, which he [defined](#) in an Edge interview with John Brockman as "*implicit, or procedural memories that are in the brain's systems, but not reflected in consciousness*" and cognitive, or explicit, memories, which he defined as "*the kind of memory we usually have in mind when we use the word memory in everyday speech.*"

Some coaching sessions and experiential learning activities evoke intense emotions in the participants, but [as Ledoux told Brockman...](#)

[T]he brain can produce emotional responses in us that have very little to do with what we think we're dealing with or talking about or thinking about at the time. In other words, emotional reactions can be elicited independent of our conscious thought

processes. For example, we've found pathways that take information into the amygdala without first going through the neocortex, which is where you need to process it in order to figure out exactly what it is and be conscious of it. So, emotions can be and, in fact, probably are mostly processed at an unconscious level. We become conscious and aware of all this after the fact.

So journaling after emotional experiences allows us to process them when we can understand them cognitively and (in some cases) *consciously* for the first time.

But, of course, many otherwise valuable coaching sessions and experiential learning activities *don't* evoke strong emotions; is it helpful to journal in these cases as well? Again, Ledoux's work suggests that it is. From [an interview with Ledoux](#) conducted by the Dana Foundation:

There is both an upside and a downside to the fact that emotional states make memories stronger. The upside is that we remember our emotional experiences to a greater extent than non-emotional ones. The downside is that we remember our emotional experiences to a greater extent than non-emotional ones.

So journaling after *non*-emotional experiences bolsters our memories of these experiences and helps to insure that they're not lost among our more powerful and long-lasting emotional memories.

One final thought--Ledoux also discussed with Brockman the potent and even destructive power of emotional memories:

Many people have problems with their emotional memories; psychologists' offices are filled with people who are basically trying to take care of and alter emotional memories, get rid of them, hold them in check.

I'd never suggest that journal-writing is a substitute for psychological care, but I do wonder if the experience of cognitively processing emotional memories in a journal entry might have some transformative power, allowing us not only to better understand those memories but also to better manage and make use of them.

(Perhaps surprisingly, given my general fondness for technology, I'm a big fan of journaling with pen and paper. The downsides are manifest--not searchable, not archivable, and the stuff does tend to pile up. But the upside is that it's a lot less tempting to edit and re-write, and I just get my thoughts out and move on. A sentence today is worth a page tomorrow. I'm not picky about pens--I prefer cheap blue Bics--but I truly love [Moleskine](#) notebooks.)



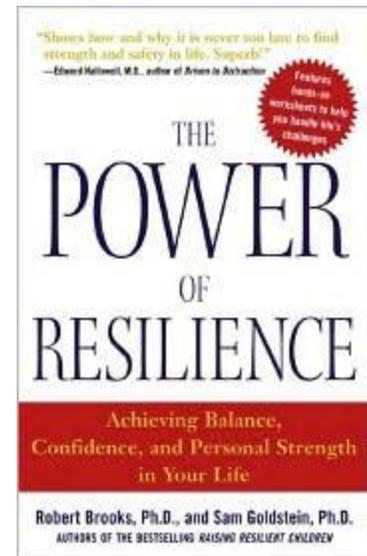
Thanks to [Mark Oehlert](#) for referring me to Ledoux in the first place. Photos by [Del Far](#) and [culture.culte](#). Yay Flickr and Creative Commons.

Original Post: <http://www.edbatista.com/2008/03/journal.html>

## 4. On Learning From Mistakes

Robert Brooks and Sam Goldstein's [The Power of Resilience](#) includes a chapter titled "Dealing Effectively with Mistakes," which I've found extremely valuable in dealing with my own mistakes.

I recently tried to pay a colleague a compliment while discussing our personal working relationship, and I wound up inadvertently insulting and hurting her. Thankfully, that very same relationship helped make it possible for her to share her feelings, and we work in an environment where that's strongly encouraged, so everything was laid on the table and not swept under the rug. And although our miscommunication says something about the challenges we've experienced in this relationship, we're also both sufficiently invested in it that we spent a lot of time afterward discussing what happened and why.



And why was "The Power of Resilience" so helpful? The book's chapter on mistakes describes four steps to "manage mistakes and setbacks" that are both thought-provoking and encouraging:

### Step 1: Examine Your Assumptions About Mistakes

The assumptions we hold about why we make mistakes exert a significant influence on our lives. We typically do not identify, reflect on, or challenge these assumptions, so they remain powerful but unrecognized forces directing our actions... When people [attribute mistakes to personal shortcomings that are not easily corrected or blame others for their mistakes], they surrender personal control, an essential component of a resilient mindset.

### Step 2: Challenge Self-Defeating Attributions

Attributions are assumptions within a [personal] mindset [about one's mistakes and failure.] When these assumptions serve as roadblocks to a resilient lifestyle, they must be defined, understood and challenged. If we are to be resilient we must strive to ensure that we avoid playing the role of a prosecuting attorney when we offer self-assessments about our mistakes. Instead, we must assume the stance of a defense attorney.

### Step 3: Learn Something Positive From Every Situation

A vital step in overcoming self-defeating attributions for mistakes is to address the question, *What can I learn from this situation?*... It is not always easy to discover the learning potential in our mistakes, especially when negative self-evaluations dominate our thinking. However, even if one's self-esteem is high...[m]any mistakes trigger feelings of disappointment and doubt... As we

focus on the theme of learning from, rather than feeling condemned by, mistakes and failure, it is helpful to remember Willie Stargell's view of mistakes...["*My success is the product of the knowledge extracted from my failures.*"]

#### **Step 4: Decide On a Plan of Action to Attempt New Scripts Based on New Attributions**

Once we have become aware of and challenged negative attributions about mistakes and failure and once we have adopted the view that mistakes are experiences to learn from, our next step is to translate this new, more positive mindset into a specific action plan... [A]sk yourself what are different things you can do to change your behavior so that mistakes are less likely to occur or to change how you view and respond to mistakes when they do occur... We wish to emphasize that by directing attention to what you can do differently, you also assume personal control for your life... As we know, this sense of personal control is a major feature of stress hardiness and resilience.

So let me look at my recent situation through the lens of these four steps:

#### **Step 1: Examine Your Assumptions About Mistakes**

I certainly don't blame my colleague for my mistake, nor do I believe it was caused by a personal shortcoming that I can't correct--a helpful start. I don't believe I'm making any assumptions that surrender my personal control over the situation, which feels empowering.

#### **Step 2: Challenge Self-Defeating Attributions**

Maintaining a sense of personal control also allows me to manage any potential negative attributions about myself. I don't feel that I'm a fundamentally bad communicator or a bad colleague. I'm examining what happened--obviously; that's the purpose of this post--but I'm not beating myself up about it. I've had some moments of deep regret, but I'm not overwhelmed by embarrassment or shame. And I recognize that there's a larger interpersonal dynamic between the two of us that was a contributing factor. So in addition to not blaming my colleague for my mistake, I'm also not blaming myself in a way that would undermine my resilience.

#### **Step 3: Learn Something Positive From Every Situation**

The key word here is *positive*. I do feel a childish temptation to take away some *negative* lessons, such as "Keep my mouth shut," but that's obviously not a *resilient* response. I feel good about the fact that my colleague trusted me enough to share her frustration and hurt--it certainly would have been easier for her to withhold those feelings, which would have prevented me from learning anything from them and would have inevitably undermined our relationship. So I learned that I can build a trust deep enough to survive such a strong blow.

I also feel good about my response to my colleague in the moment--I was able to hear her feelings, express my deep regret at hurting her, and share my own hurt and frustration as well. I learned that I can be fully present in a confrontation, take in some strong emotions that were hard to hear, and manage my own strong emotions while not ignoring or discounting them.

Finally, I feel great about our ability to hang in there through the post-incident debrief. That's not to say we completely healed the wounds, but we did come to some important new understandings about ourselves and about our relationship. In the end I'm not glad it happened, but I'd rather have it happen and reach these understandings than miss the learning opportunity (as painful as it might be), and that's the ultimate positive lesson.

#### **Step 4: Decide On a Plan of Action to Attempt New Scripts Based on New Attributions**

Today's experience suggest some immediately actionable items: I just came off an emotionally intense, weekend-long retreat, and after experiences like that I really need to pause before I speak and think about what I'm saying, because I'm a little jangly and my judgment isn't the best. In addition, I believed that my intentions were clearly understood by my colleague when they were not, which made it easy to misinterpret my comments. And perhaps most importantly, I failed to register her lack of immediate response, which actually indicated the depth of her distress. So I feel like I have *plenty* of work to do going forward.

Brooks and Goldstein conclude their chapter on mistakes with a few heartening words:

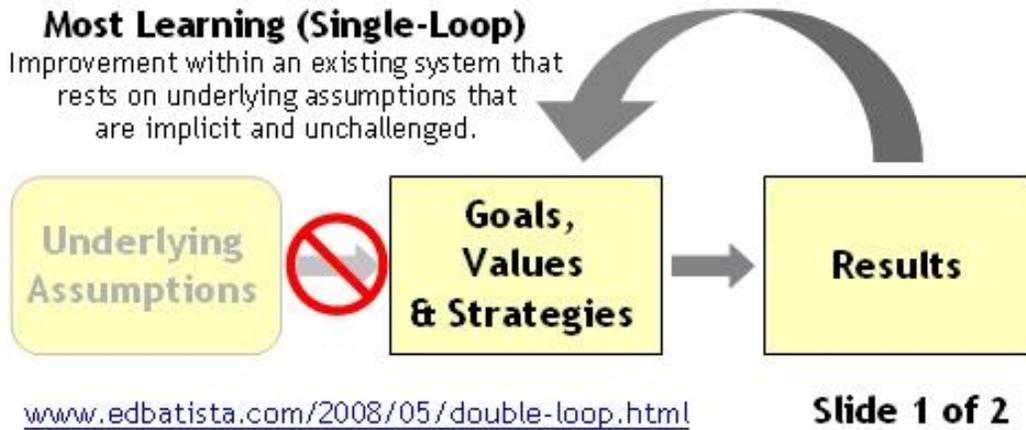
[M]istaken attitudes about mistakes are a bigger problem than making mistakes. Resilient people view mistakes as experiences to learn from. If you are to lead a resilient lifestyle, you must recognize that mistakes and failure are a natural occurrence within that lifestyle. Your choice is the manner in which you respond to these events.

And I chose to channel the energy that remained from the exchange into this post, and to assume that Willie Stargell's right: *"My success is the product of the knowledge extracted from my failures."* (And by that logic I feel like some big successes should be right around the corner.)

**Original Post:** <http://www.edbatista.com/2009/02/mistakes.html>

## 5. Double-Loop Learning

"Double-loop learning" is a topic I've touched on while discussing [meta-work](#), [executive coaching](#) and [feedback](#), but here's a simple overview. (And here's a [2-slide PowerPoint file](#) of the images below, 64 KB.)



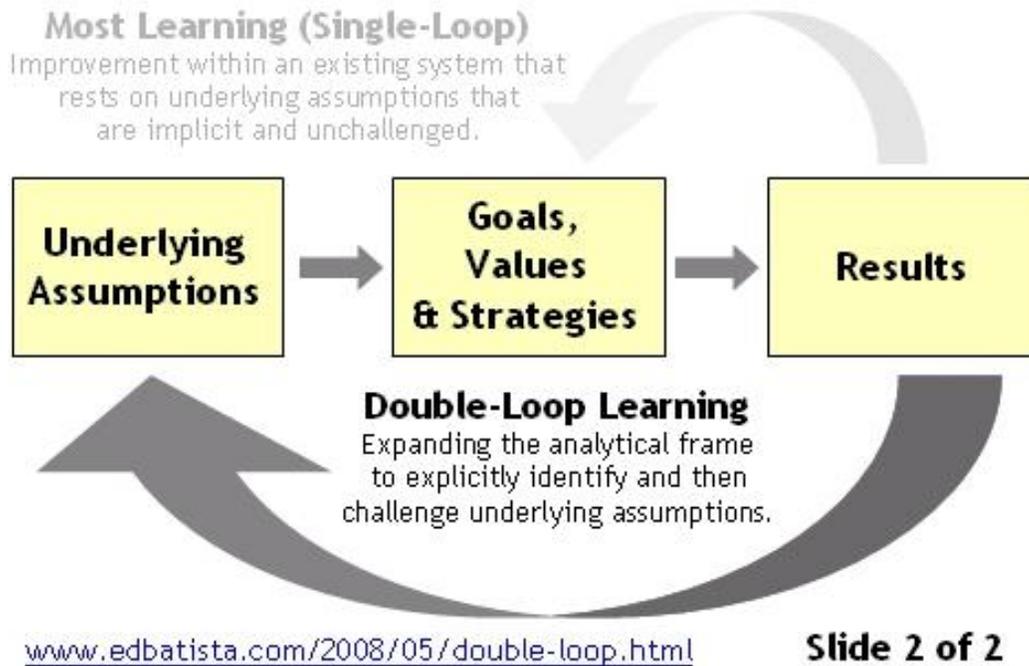
Most learning can be described as "single-loop." We start with a set of goals, values and strategies that yield results. We assess the results, refine our techniques, and try again. One loop.

But our goals, values and strategies rest on a set of underlying assumptions that are implicit and unchallenged. Single-loop learning can help us pursue a goal more effectively by altering our methods, but it doesn't help us determine whether the goal is worth pursuing in the first place.

As [I wrote in 2006...](#)

In most circumstances, the learning we undertake is aimed at improving our performance relative to a set of goals and other factors that are taken for granted. Feedback from our performance (or "learning from our mistakes") typically cycles immediately back into our analysis of the strategies, tactics or techniques that led to our performance. This is important work, but it's inherently limited by those initial factors that are taken for granted at the outset and that remain unchallenged by an assessment of the performance results.

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Double-loop learning occurs when we expand the analytical frame to explicitly identify and then challenge any underlying assumptions that support our stated goals, values and strategies.

Rather than only ask, "*How can we achieve our goals more effectively?*", we look deeper and also ask...

- *What assumptions support our goals, values and strategies?*
- *How can we test these assumptions?*
- *Having tested these assumptions, should we change our goals, values or strategies?*

Again, as [I wrote in 2006...](#)

In contrast, if we can pull back and expand the frame of our analysis, we begin to call into question some of the factors that we usually take for granted. Our performance results aren't simply used to assess the strategies that have been derived from those factors--they question the factors themselves.

I realize that this can seem somewhat abstract, so it may be useful to refer to the posts mentioned above, which discuss double-loop learning in the context of [meta-work](#), [executive coaching](#) and [feedback](#). I've also found Mark Smith's essay on double-loop learning at [Informal Education](#) extremely valuable.

And continued thanks to [Chris Argyris](#), who first developed the concept of double-loop learning, and whose thoughts on theories of action and organizational learning inform my own work on a daily basis.

**Original Post:** <http://www.edbatista.com/2008/05/double-loop.html>

## 6. When Heuristics Go Bad

Much of our problem-solving behavior relies on heuristics, conceptual rules of thumb that allow us to sift through information quickly and find a likely answer to a question more efficiently. We couldn't function without heuristics, but they're prone to biases which regularly lead us astray. Writing in the January 29, 2007 issue of *The New Yorker*, Jerome Groopman discussed [heuristics and related biases that affect physicians](#) (and which clearly affect the rest of us as well):



- **Representativeness Bias.** Groopman writes, "Doctors make [representative] errors when their thinking is overly influenced by what is typically true; they fail to consider possibilities that contradict their mental templates of a disease, and thus attribute symptoms to the wrong cause." Pat Croskerry, a physician who's written [Achieving Quality in Clinical Decision Making](#) (abstract) as well as [The Theory and Practice of Clinical Decision Making](#) (full-text) told Groopman, "You have to be prepared in your mind for the atypical."
- **Availability Bias**, which Groopman defines as "the tendency to judge the likelihood of an event by the ease with which relevant examples come to mind." He continues, "[A] businessman may estimate the likelihood that a given venture could fail by recalling difficulties that his associates had encountered in the marketplace, rather than by relying on all the data available to him about the venture; the experiences most familiar to him can bias his assessment of the chances for success... (Psychologists call this kind of cognitive cherry-picking 'confirmation bias': confirming what you expect to find by selectively accepting or ignoring information.)"
- **Affective Errors.** Groopman relates how he once failed to thoroughly examine a patient whom he felt warmly toward in order to minimize the patient's discomfort and possibly because, "I hoped unconsciously that the cause of his fever was trivial and that I would not find evidence of an infection on his body." Groopman continues, "This tendency to make decisions based on what we wish were true is what Croskerry calls an 'affective error.'"

Groopman concludes...

As...cognitive psychologists have shown, when people are confronted with uncertainty...they are susceptible to unconscious emotions and personal biases, and are more likely to make cognitive errors. Croskerry believes that the first step toward incorporating an awareness of heuristics and their liabilities into medical practice is to recognize that how doctors think can affect their success as much as how much they know, or how much experience they have.

"Currently, in medical training, we fail to recognize the importance of critical thinking and critical reasoning," Croskerry told me. "The implicit assumption in medicine is that we know how to think. But we don't."

Groopman's article focuses on the role played by heuristics in medicine, but his thesis is applicable in **any** field of endeavor; Croskerry could have said, "The implicit assumption in **life** is that we know how to think. But we don't." We could all stand to "incorporate an awareness of heuristics and their liabilities into our practice," no matter what business we're in. (Wikipedia's [list of psychological heuristics](#) isn't a bad place to start.)

Thanks to [Roberto Fernandez](#), whose outstanding class on Organizational Behavior at Stanford's Graduate School of Business first introduced me to heuristics and who impressed upon me the importance of recognizing that our minds play tricks on us in (sadly) predictable ways.

**Original Post:** [http://www.edbatista.com/2007/02/when\\_heuristics.html](http://www.edbatista.com/2007/02/when_heuristics.html)

## 7. Pat Croskerry on Successful Decision-Making

*What elements contribute to successful decision-making?*

The previous post on heuristics refers to Dr. Pat Croskerry and his 2005 paper on [The Theory and Practice of Clinical Decision-Making](#). Although Croskerry's research focuses on decision-making by physicians, his conclusions clearly have implications for the rest of us. From his paper's final passage, titled "*Towards a universal theory of decision-making*":



The successful decision-maker will be one who has an ergonomically optimized workplace, is well rested and well slept, is not driven by throughput pressures, is aware of the various cognitive and affective biases, and is able to safely blend cognitive intuitive and analytical styles according to the particular task at hand. This last is especially important. It invokes the concept of situational awareness - knowing what has gone before, what is happening now, anticipating what is coming, and then having one's cognitive engine in the right gear. Occasionally, it may have to be metacognitively kicked up a notch to match the situation.

So how might we improve the quality of our own decisions? Some of Croskerry's recommendations are obvious (although my experience is that they're ignored routinely): Make your workspace physically comfortable. Get enough sleep. Resist "throughput pressures" and take the time you need to think clearly.

But he also touches on two topics that require more effort to fully understand and integrate into our daily routines:

### 1. Be aware of cognitive biases.

Croskerry believes that some of our heuristics are by-products of evolution:

[T]here are persuasive arguments that we may be hard-wired to respond to certain features of our environment as well as to processing information in predictable ways... If there is any feature of cognitive activity that might influence whether or not our genes get into the next generation, decision-making would appear to be a good bet - presumably good decision-makers have a higher rate of survival.

But this suggests that we need to take great care to understand and compensate for the biases that stem from our cognitive inheritance:

If we come to accept that certain [cognitive dispositions to respond] are, indeed, hard-wired, there are important implications... If heuristic strategies are the stuff upon which cognition evolved...it places an even stronger imperative on the need for research into de-biasing strategies - finding ways of

undoing our innate tendencies that evolved in simpler times and which now may be counter productive in modern medicine.

How to put this into practice? One way to start is to understand the [cognitive biases](#) that may be affecting our decision-making. (I suspect I'm predisposed toward [confirmation bias](#).) Awareness by itself is insufficient to create change, but change is impossible without it.

## 2. Match the appropriate cognitive style to the task at hand.

Although this point raises a number of questions that are well worth further exploration--*What are the different cognitive styles at my disposal? What's my default style? To what extent can I change styles, and how much effort will be required to do so?*--I think it's possible to boil it down to a simple imperative: Learn when to trust your instincts...and when to distrust them.

As Croskerry notes, situational awareness is key, and even in a state of heightened perception we may have to "metacognitively [kick it] up a notch" to match our style to the situation. Essentially this means we sometimes need to "think about how we're thinking." Should we go with our intuition? Or should we discount our intuition and be more analytical? (And clearly, familiarity with the cognitive biases noted above will help us select the right cognitive style.)

**Original Post:** [http://www.edbatista.com/2007/03/pat\\_croskerry\\_o.html](http://www.edbatista.com/2007/03/pat_croskerry_o.html)

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## About Me

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### Professional

I'm an executive coach, a change management consultant, and a [Leadership Coach at Stanford's Graduate School of Business](#). I help individuals find professional fulfillment and develop their leadership and interpersonal skills; I help people work together more effectively as members of a team; and I help companies and nonprofits adapt their management practices and organizational culture to better fit their changing needs.

My work as a coach began after a 15-year career in management, during which I took two years off to earn an MBA at Stanford, and I've helped launch three new organizations. In addition to coaching and change management, I'm particularly interested in the intersection of organizational culture and social technology.

### Personal

I've lived in [San Francisco](#) since 1990; I'm married to Amy Wright, a recovering corporate attorney-turned-law school librarian; and I'm passionate about listening to [music](#) (particularly jazz, but I love punk, blues and bluegrass as well), [hiking throughout the Bay Area](#), and visiting [New Orleans](#) whenever possible.

## What I Do

[services.edbatista.com](http://services.edbatista.com)

Put simply, I help individuals find professional fulfillment; I help people work together more effectively as members of a team; and I help companies and nonprofits adapt their management practices and organizational culture to better fit their changing needs.

My coaching services are aimed at helping people be as fulfilled and as effective as possible in their professional lives. I work with individuals to assist them in unlocking their full potential, meeting new challenges, and developing their skills. People often find an executive coach a helpful resource when they're...

- Starting a new job
- Taking on new responsibilities
- Coping with a changing environment
- Considering a new position or career
- Addressing areas for improvement
- Simply trying to get "unstuck"

I'd be happy to have an initial conversation to discuss your needs and how we might work together. My contact information is above, or you can reach me at [contact.edbatista.com](http://contact.edbatista.com).

