

## Strategies and Solutions

# Continual Learning: The Ultimate Skill-Set Builder

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### **A world-class supply manager stays world-class by continually learning, growing, and adapting new skills and techniques.**

How are you meeting the new millennium's challenges for supply management professionals? Your organization probably counts on you to play a vital part in the strategic business of supply management. You may also be expected to constantly increase your value to your company - and prove it. The only way to meet these new demands is to become a consummate continual learner.

As Larry Giunipero reported in a recent CAPS Research study, supply management professionals today must be much more advanced in their knowledge and skills in order to keep up with the demands of a fast-changing profession. They are expected to acquire new skills such as those related to electronic sourcing, enterprisewide value creation, and formal market analysis, to mention only a few. In addition, they are required to possess a new level of sophistication and competence in more familiar skill areas like interpersonal communications and relationship management.

Knowledge today can become obsolete so quickly that ongoing professional development is key to surviving and thriving in the present and the future. Supply management professionals who are at the top of the field continuously improve their skills, even in relatively basic areas like computer literacy and team skills. That is why the CAPS study included continual learning as one of eight major skills of the world-class purchaser. Although it is not actually a skill itself, *continual learning* is a critical *skill-set builder* that is vital to the career growth and success of supply managers. This is true, of course, not only in supply management but in many, if not most, professions. Even 10 years ago, William Hersey noted in his book, *Blueprints for Memory: Your Guide for Remembering Business Facts, Figures, and Faces*, that "continuous learning is the imperative of the present. Ongoing self-improvement no longer refers to whatever you'd like to study for 'enrichment,' but to what you must do to keep from going broke when the skills you thought would sustain you for a lifetime just aren't enough."

What does it mean to engage in continual learning? At the least, it means attending whatever training one's organization requires and taking additional continuing education courses to stay up-to-date on topics that ensure you stay current in your discipline. However, real continual learning must go far beyond this minimum standard. It entails continually evaluating

one's own knowledge and skills against those of excellent performers, looking for a variety of ways that one might learn and grow, and initiating those formal and informal learning opportunities.

### **Attributes of Continual Learners**

So what are the attributes or characteristics of people who successfully engage in continual learning? Continual learners are open to *multifaceted approaches* to learning. They recognize that their learning must take multiple forms if they are to keep up with constant change and information overload. They draw on at least three different modes of learning in their daily lives: natural, personal-strategic, and formal.

**Natural learning** is the way everyone first learned when they were young. Children seize opportunities to learn as they arise. They are naturally curious about nearly everything. When children stumble across something new and interesting, they explore it from every angle. When they learn a new and fun skill, they repeat it again and again with total concentration and joy until they master it. Learning is play. Unfortunately, most adults rarely approach the world with such an inquisitive mind. But those who manage to continue to grow and evolve professionally often succeed in recapturing some of this childlike attitude -- they are open to change in their work lives and are excited about opportunities to learn new skills. And, like children, they can learn by taking risks. For example, when you are negotiating with a prospective supplier, you might try a new approach. Or you might consider collecting data for a market analysis from nontraditional resources. Remember, you can learn as much from your failures as from your successes. If you are a natural learner, you will display genuine intellectual curiosity, making learning a natural and regular part of your life.

**Personal-strategic learning** is more purposive. It involves taking an active learning role in one's world and in one's work. In his book, *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge refers to the continual learner's need for a personal vision. Effective learners recognize their own values and priorities with regard to their lives and their work. They *take personal responsibility for their own professional development*. They develop what Nicholas Imparato and Oren Harari in their 1994 book, *Jumping the Curve*, called bifocal vision, simultaneously perfecting today's performance while looking ahead at the requirements for the future. They become the owners and directors of their day-to-day learning.

Such an approach involves several related elements. First, personal-strategic learners *determine what they need to learn* and why it is important. To do so, they may examine their organization's goals and strategies, consider their personal aspirations, and critically evaluate their strengths and weaknesses, as well as areas that they feel need refreshing. They often *seek out feedback* about their own work world and their contribution to it. They demonstrate the maturity to remain open to feedback. They use the feedback to improve the way they function and perform their jobs. They practice strategic listening, which involves focused, two-way interactions with others including colleagues, customers, and competitors.

Continual learners look for *opportunities to develop needed skills and knowledge*. For example, you might consider developing a personal learning plan or participating in the C.P.M.

program to guide your personal-strategic learning efforts. You may cultivate relationships with knowledgeable colleagues or mentors and seek new and challenging responsibilities on the job.

Sometimes, the most important strategic learning simply requires taking the time to think and to reflect on experiences. According to Senge, continual learners are observers of their own actions. They learn in a cyclical fashion: they act, reflect, and connect. For example, upon completing a transaction with a supplier, you might set aside time to contemplate what happened. Think about what went well, how you could improve, and how underlying beliefs and attitudes affected what happened. Complete the cycle by making connections between what you learned from these reflections and possible actions for the future.

**Formal learning** includes activities such as participating in a formal training curriculum. All supply professionals were introduced to formal learning in school, where learning was more structured and there was the requirement to learn certain things at certain times. Most became proficient at listening, remembering, and taking tests but weren't necessarily encouraged to take charge of their own learning. This type of learning is, of course, a necessary tool for continual learners. It can be very effective, but you must take an active approach to it - for example, thinking about how the training material can best be applied to the specifics of your job. However, a world-class purchaser would not use a lack of formal learning opportunities as an excuse to opt out of learning. Formal learning should not substitute for the other types of continual learning. Remember that the effective continual learner takes a multifaceted approach to learning.

### **Cultivating the Attributes of Continual Learners**

Common business wisdom for this century is that the key to success is to learn faster than your competitors. If you apply this wisdom to your own career success, you will certainly want to acquire the attributes of continual learners. What does this mean for you? First, develop the natural curiosity of a child. Take some risks, learn from your mistakes, and take delight in new experiences.

Second, pursue your own personal vision with vigor. Focus on today while looking ahead to tomorrow. Become a strategic listener and don't be afraid of feedback. Be open to change.

Third, make formal learning a priority. Take advantage of opportunities to participate in education and training. Practice the new skills immediately and frequently. However, never assume that learning can only occur in the classroom. View every experience as an opportunity to engage your intellectual curiosity.