



Improve Your Mind for Business

How to keep yourself fresh, creative, and alert

Tim Stevenson

A YOUNG MAN once asked Peter Drucker what one thing he could do to be better in business. Drucker's reply was, "Learn to play the violin."

Drucker was known for having a sense of humor to go with his unsurpassed knowledge of management, but he was not just teasing in his answer. He was making a serious point: ***To gain a sharper mind for business, stretch and grow your mind on subjects other than business.***

The benefits of investing time outside of business are many. We are able to rest and recharge, mentally and emotionally. Creating mental and emotional space apart from the daily

intense grind allows intuition and creativity to thrive, enabling better problem-solving. We not only derive enjoyment and life-long learning, but we can also grow in wisdom which is useful for any pursuit, including business.

Wisdom and how to get it

"Knowledge" and "wisdom" overlap and are often used synonymously, but they are not the same.

Knowledge is understanding what a tool is and how it works. Wisdom is knowing how and when to use it. A practical working definition of wisdom, therefore, is "applied knowledge." Wisdom is knowledge put to effective work.

Once you see the distinction, you'll understand why there can be people who possess a great deal of knowledge but lack common sense and good judgment. I've known highly educated, intelligent individuals — even some with Ph.D.s — whose advice in practical matters I would quickly dismiss. It's possible to be a highly intelligent impractical knucklehead.



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The principle of transferability

If you do want to grow in wisdom, where do you start? **Wisdom is usually acquired indirectly.** That's where Peter Drucker's offbeat answer shows real shrewdness. You gain knowledge by investigating a single subject in depth. You gain wisdom by broadening your world of experiences and through reflection. Columnist Marilyn vos Savant says:

To acquire knowledge, one must study; to acquire wisdom, one must observe.

Her comment echoes the ancient sage, King Solomon. If you could ask Solomon how to acquire wisdom, he would answer, "Go observe an anthill." His meaning: Watch how the ants work diligently, without any whip-cracking overseers to make them do it. See how they gather their food in the summer before it is needed in winter. Notice how they work together to accomplish tasks they could never do alone. Reflect and learn from the wise ants the qualities of foresight, diligence, individual responsibility, and teamwork.

This principle is called the **transferability of an observation or experience.** It is the ability to have an experience or make an observation *over here* and see how it can be applied *over there*. This is why we can sharpen our minds and grow in wisdom through studying things that have no direct connection to our main occupation. We gain insights that have *transferable value*.

The power of curiosity

For centuries, people in central Europe sought folk remedies for minor pains, such as headaches, toothaches, and muscle aches. If you could go back in a time machine and ask

pre-modern people for a pain reliever, uneducated peasants would advise you, "Chew on the bark of a willow tree." Local merchants during the Middle Ages would have sold you extracts of the same as a pain remedy.

Many moderns sneer at the ignorance of pre-scientific notions, but not so fast. Folk remedies often have some connection with reality; otherwise, they wouldn't have endured through centuries.

In the 1890s, a German chemist named Felix Hoffman got curious and decided to determine whether there was any truth to the willow bark remedy. After testing and discarding several hypotheses, a certain bitter taste pointed to the answer. A few decades earlier, chemists had isolated a compound called acetylsalicylic acid, but couldn't see a useable application for it. Hoffman determined that it was the operative chemical in willow bark that relieves pain.

Hoffman happened to work for a company founded in 1863 by Friedrich Bayer. By 1900, their new pain remedy was being sold all over the world — because acetylsalicylic acid is the technical name for what became famous as "Aspirin."

For over a century now, Bayer has been reaping profits from Hoffman's curiosity and diligence. Who knows what is out there to be discovered or created in your vicinity? Who knows what problems could be solved, or what processes might be improved, by the creative energies of active imaginations?

Curious minds wander outside the beaten paths and can pay major dividends!

Besides the practical value of learning useful applications, curious observant people are simply more interesting to be around. Their well-rounded wisdom facilitates the building of relationships, which essential for leading effectively.

What you can do

You gain knowledge through *depth*; you gain wisdom through *breadth*. Wisdom is all around to the inquisitive and active mind. Here are some ideas you can apply to broaden your exposure to stimulating experiences and sharpen your thinking:

- ***Pursue your interests***

I've often been asked by many people, "What should I read?" I always answer back with a question: "What are you interested in?" Because of the principle of transferability, I believe that pursuing almost any subject can be helpful. Besides, in a world where a high percentage of people don't enjoy reading, their best chance of breaking through that reluctance is by reading what they find interesting and stimulating.

The same is true in other pursuits. Winston Churchill was an award-winning painter, as is the singer Tony Bennett. Ronald Heifetz, an important writer on the subject of leadership, is an excellent cellist. A former dentist of mine is a pianist of professional quality with several recordings to his credit. My current dentist, nationally known in his field, is also an accomplished guitarist and leads music at his place of worship.

- ***Travel through time***

That means exposing yourself to the ideas, assumptions, and insights of other eras in history, whether it is through reading, watching movies, or studying art. Every era has its own characteristic strengths and weaknesses. If you read only books of our present era, for example, you will be reading the views of people who share all the same assumptions as you and the people around you. They'll reinforce where we

already agree, while leaving our blind spots untouched. Older books aren't perfect, but their weaknesses are easily spotted with the passing of time, and they offer stimulating insights that are typically neglected and overlooked today. That's why reading older books is a good way to be on the cutting edge. The old is new again.

- ***Take a class or get instruction in a new interest***

One of my coaching clients is taking ballroom dancing lessons. Another is learning to paint. Another does quilting. Why not try that activity you've secretly thought about?

- ***Get some physical exercise***

All of us aren't athletes, but most of us would benefit from more exercise. You don't have to run a marathon, though I know people who do. Just walk around the block, do some simple weight training, or play a sport. It's not only good for the body. It's amazing what it does to refresh and recharge your mind, providing a genuine and healthy attitude adjustment!

- ***Make sure you get rest and sleep***

Like machines our bodies need regular fuel, maintenance, and rest. Fatigue dampens our mental capacities and creativity.

There are many other ideas to consider and try. Of course, you could simply follow Peter Drucker's advice literally and take up the violin! There's a world of enjoyment, stimulation, and personal growth out there to be explored, and doing so will make you better, whatever your business. **L**