



T W O

BEGINNING AS A BEGINNER

In any new endeavor you undertake—be it social, recreational, or occupational—you must begin as a beginner. You can't avoid it. But being a beginner is not a bad thing. To the contrary, it means you are starting on a grand adventure to attain new experiences, new knowledge, and new skills. Every journey—including the journey to expertise—begins with a single step.

Although everyone is a beginner at sometime or something, those who enter a business or profession seldom do so knowing nothing. To every new job, you bring preconceived notions of what people in that workplace do and how they do it. Your preconceptions may be based on previous experience, schooling, training, casual reading, or, perhaps, only on assumptions that may or may not be correct. You envision yourself in this job. You believe you have the requisite attitudes and qualities for the job and therefore will be successful. One drawback is that, because you lack experience, knowledge, and skills, you often don't know just how little you know. In fact, beginners often think they know a great deal. Overestimating

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both your knowledge and skills can keep you at the beginner level until you realize what you need to know and how you need to do something. Then you begin to gain the knowledge and skills that move you beyond the beginner level.

Beginners can generally be considered those with less than three years of experience. But more experience alone does not make beginners smarter or more skilled. The sad reality is that some people perform at the beginner level for a lifetime.

Teacher as Beginner

At one time I supervised student teachers in public schools. It was enjoyable because I got to see many bright, enthusiastic young teachers instructing bright, enthusiastic young students. During one visit, the mentor teacher told me he was having a problem with the student teacher. “She shows no respect for my experience,” he said. In a meeting together after class, the mentor was quick to air his concerns. The student teacher interjected, “But there are more contemporary ways . . .” She was quickly cut off by the mentor’s loud proclamation, “I’ve been teaching for twenty-five years!” The student teacher revealed more pluck than tact when she corrected him, “No. You taught one year and repeated it twenty-four times!” She had a valid point. While the mentor teacher was considered a nice person, few considered him a good teacher. He had learned little from his experience. We quickly transferred the young student teacher to another school. Interestingly, years later she was named her state’s teacher of the year.

Beginner Characteristics

Beyond their lack of experience, generally beginners share four common characteristics. Recognizing these characteristics can help you

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assess your present level of expertise as a beginner and understand what to do to become more expert. It can also help human resource and training personnel, or potential mentors, determine how to help someone move beyond the beginner level. Beginners commonly

- Behave in ways that are rational, procedural, and inflexible
- Make decisions guided by rules and norms
- Do not feel responsible for the outcomes of their actions
- Lack comfortable, efficient routines for everyday tasks

Behaving Rationally, Procedurally, and Inflexibly

As a beginner, with your limited experience, knowledge, and skills, you have few options when it comes to taking action. Limited knowledge and skills provide you with limited options when identifying problems, planning actions, or completing tasks. As a result, you must rely on rational thought rather than on instinct or practical knowledge. As a beginner, you often look for procedures to follow and patterns of behavior to emulate. Lacking a deep understanding as to *why* something may be done in a particular way, you will often simply accept *how* it is done by those who seem to be in the know. Your actions therefore tend to be rigid and step-by-step as you attempt to follow established procedures learned in training programs or by reading manuals.

To help beginners become productive quickly, training instructions often offer a progressive sequence of steps that translate easily into action. Computer maker Hewlett-Packard, for example, offers beginning salespeople a seven-step procedure for selling digital printers:¹

1. Get in the door.
2. Identify their pain.

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3. Use a leadership sales approach.
4. Talk the talk.
5. Ask the right question.
6. Develop your solution.
7. Present the solution.

Tips for implementing each step are also offered. This procedure serves as a recipe for sales success and saves beginning salespeople much time—time that would otherwise be spent on experiments with various techniques and models. The steps are rational and procedural and, because they are sequential, they are also relatively inflexible.

While supplying beginners with rational procedures for accomplishing the fundamental tasks of their profession is an important and useful goal of training programs—and beginners adapting to accepted behavioral practices in their job is smart, profitable politics—serious and detrimental consequences can result if conditions and circumstances are not carefully considered. There are times when following established procedures may not be the best course of action. Ray Alcorn makes this point in his article “Top 5 Mistakes of Beginning Commercial Real Estate Investors” when he identifies the number one mistake beginning investors make as ignoring local market conditions.² A beginner often believes that a great property equals a great investment, but as Alcorn notes, “A great property in a bad market can be a big loser. Analyzing the demographic trends of population growth, income, and employment in the local market will tell you where opportunity lies, or not. Those conditions will make or break your investment.” In other words, following a rigid set of procedures for all properties in all markets can lead to disaster for beginning investors.

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Every organization has tasks for which specific, inflexible procedures work well. For example, completing travel reimbursements, processing orders, and posting organizationwide announcements are conducted more efficiently when everyone follows the same process—regardless of experience, position in the organization, or level of expertise. However,

As beginners, we cannot stay stuck in a rigid approach forever if we want to advance to the next step.

Strictly following traditional procedures helps beginners fit in a new organization, but if they do not explore alternatives, they will remain relatively low-level performers.

Making Decisions Guided by Rules and Norms

When you are a beginner, your decisions usually are tied to the rules and norms of an organization. Rules offer guides to decisions and actions, and norms are the stuff of corporate cultures and traditions. Thus, rules represent the explicit or stated principles on which to make decisions, whereas norms are the implicit or unspoken beliefs and values that shape how people think in a workplace.

To become competent in your new role and prove yourself worthy, as a beginner, you learn the rules and norms that govern behavior in the new workplace. Your conception of doing the job correctly includes decisions based on the workplace rules and traditions, particularly those centered on establishing order and managing the workplace environment. You see established, orderly practices as characteristic of competence.

Rules and norms can provide the foundation for greater understanding and expertise.

Changing Focus

The story of Marvin Traub demonstrates how an individual can learn the rules and norms on which to base decisions in his industry. During his first week at Bloomingdale's, Marvin was called into chairman Jed Davidson's office. Marvin was instructed to analyze the cost of *Daily News* full-color ads and to calculate how much was being lost on Bloomingdale's dresses that were selling for \$2.99. (This was in 1950!) Marvin was surprised to learn that Mr. Davidson thought the dresses were losing money, because these particular dresses sold very well. But Jed Davidson was asking, Did it make good business sense? So Marvin added up the wholesale costs of the dresses sold and deducted the cost of advertising. He was shocked by what he found: Bloomingdale's lost twenty-five to thirty-five cents on every dress it sold. The more dresses it sold, the more money it lost. The store gave up the full-page ads, and Marvin learned the first rule of retailing: Focus not on gross sales but on profit! Later, as chairman and CEO, Marvin Traub used that rule to lead Bloomingdale's to a position of celebrated prominence in American retailing.³

Genius in a Little Rule

I found a personal example of a foundational rule one evening in Home Depot. A broken toilet had sent me off in search of a replacement part. I walked into the plumbing section with a broken something-or-other. It was only a small piece of a larger part of the entire apparatus.

A young associate greeted me with a smile and a welcome: "How can I help you?" I presented the piece to him. "What is it?" he asked. "I don't know. It came out of my toilet tank," I replied. "Oh, I think we can help you." He then examined several possibilities for a re-

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placement, and when he thought he found one, he confirmed his decision with a colleague. Next, he carefully explained, step-by-step, how to replace the part and assured me that I had all the tools I needed. The entire process took about thirty minutes. The total cost of the part was less than four dollars. Home Depot made no money on my purchase. When I complimented the associate on his excellent customer service, he said that during training he was told that he should “treat every customer like a relative.” As we parted, he said, “I would have done the same for any member of my family.” There is genius in that simple little rule: *Treat every customer like a relative*. First, it gave that beginner sales professional a clear guide when making customer service decisions. Second, it provided superior service that ensured that I will return many times to a place that treats me like family.

Failing to Take Responsibility for One’s Actions

On Friday, August 26, 2005, National Hurricane Center director Max Mayfield reported to the press, “I just don’t see any reason why this will not become a very, very powerful hurricane before it is all over.”⁴ Three days later Hurricane Katrina came out of the Gulf of Mexico and slammed onto shore near the Louisiana–Mississippi state line. A short time later, two major flood control levees were breached, submerging New Orleans. Twelve hours later, one of the most powerful hurricanes in U.S. history was finally downgraded to a tropical storm; but, in Katrina’s wake lay death, devastation, and hundreds of thousands of people without food, water, or shelter.

Michael Brown joined the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in 2001 as legal counsel. In 2003, he became director. Prior to joining FEMA, he had spent ten years as a commissioner

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for the International Arabian Horse Association. With no training or experience in emergency management, Michael Brown was a beginner in a position—heading the federal government’s emergency management agency—needing an expert.

As is characteristic of beginners, Brown did not feel responsible for the disaster unfolding in New Orleans. He refused to shoulder responsibility for FEMA’s slow response to the disaster, and instead blamed Louisiana’s leaders for failing to act quickly enough to the approaching hurricane. When informed by a FEMA employee in New Orleans that they were running out of food and water, and that people were dying due to a lack of proper medical facilities, Brown e-mailed back, “Thanks for the update. Anything specific I need to do or tweak?”⁵

As a beginner, you seldom feel you have personal control over conditions and events. That feeling can lead to a lack of a sense of responsibility for the consequences of your actions or inactions. When you fail, you often blame conditions, resources, or others for your failure. “I wasn’t trained for this,” “That’s not my job,” or “If we had the same resources as our competitors, we would have won that contract” are thoughts commonly expressed by beginners and others with limited expertise. As a beginner, if you blindly follow the rules, you cannot adequately analyze a problem or see possible solutions that may actually be within your knowledge base or skill set. If you’ve followed procedures and made decisions guided by the rules and tradition, you may feel you’ve done all that can reasonably be expected and become a passive participant in the process.

Taking Responsibility

In a recent study, twenty-one ultraendurance triathletes were divided by finishing times into three groups: leaders of the pack, middle of the

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pack, and back of the pack. The triathletes' decision making during their performance was analyzed, and the findings are startling. The leaders focused tightly on actions to improve their performance, whereas middle- and back-of-the-pack triathletes reported a greater number of passive thoughts. For example, middle-of-the-packers might passively observe that it was a warm day, whereas leaders would consider how the temperature might impact their performance and subsequently make adjustments in their pace, nutrition, equipment, and hydration. Furthermore, leaders were more proactive in their approach to performance situations than were middle- and back-of-the-pack triathletes. They saw their performance as a direct result of their actions and took proactive responsibility. The lower performers felt no such responsibility and consequently were proactive in neither decisions nor actions.⁶

As a beginner, you may feel a lack of control and responsibility. If so, you may not be inclined to put much effort toward improving your performance when you feel you have neither responsibility for nor control of the results. You may even dismiss poor performance as normal and acceptable and give up early and easily. This characteristic is a watershed mark in developing expertise. When you feel responsible for outcomes and adjust your actions to improve your performance, you begin moving to the next step toward becoming expert.

Whereas beginners may give up on clients, products, or plans too quickly, superior performers are never willing to give up.

The drive to succeed and reach their full potential propels great leaders, inventors, writers, and entrepreneurs to the pinnacle of their profession. Should you ever find yourself giving up on a business matter, realize that you are also giving up on yourself as a businessperson.

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Refusing to give up and searching for ways to turn defeat to victory help move you past the beginner step.

Lacking Comfortable, Efficient Routines

Beginners sometimes become mired in the mundane because they haven't established personal work routines. They don't have the ability to see the interconnection of events in a business. A beginning sales representative may, for example, get caught up in friendly communications with a potential customer while overlooking more important tasks such as closing a sale, taking an order, or scheduling a delivery.

It's hard for beginners to sense the overall objective or see the relationships between events. The bigger picture that includes what came before and what will likely happen later eludes you as you concentrate solely on the immediate challenge before you. Which challenges or tasks are unique and which will repeat over time are a mystery, so every task is approached as a new challenge every time.

With increased experience and discussions with colleagues, beginners start to recognize consistencies in the everyday or mundane activities of the workday.

As consistent activities recur, you start to develop effective routines to minimize organizational and management functions so that you can maximize your focus on completing the most essential tasks effectively. These routines are based on increased experience, knowledge, and skills, as well as familiarity, in the workplace. Through trial and error you find not only what works but also what feels comfortable. Being provided with examples and alternatives for conducting the ac-

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tivities of a business can help you select and cultivate those routines that increase both the quality and the quantity of your work.

How Beginners Learn

It's possible to remain a beginner for a lifetime. To move to the next level of expertise, you need to gain experience, to increase knowledge, and to develop some useful skills. Beginners have three preferred ways of learning:

- From experience
- With guidance from rules and established procedures
- Through mentoring

Experience: The Greatest Teacher

For beginners, few things beat trial and error (especially error) for learning. Despite anything you're told, you just have to go out and see for yourself how things are. Perhaps reflecting your limited practical experience, real-world practice is your most important source of information for increasing competence. For beginners acquiring knowledge and skills, verbal or written information almost always takes second place to trial and error.

Simply put, there is no substitute for experience. Beginners usually develop a repertoire of professional skills by combining observations of experienced colleagues, personal trial-and-error experiences, and recollections of early role models. The more experiences and the greater the diversity of those experiences, the faster beginners learn and the more they improve. However, while experience is a critical aspect of improving performance, experience alone does not increase expertise.

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Rules and Established Procedures: Important

For organizations, having a clear set of written rules and established procedures—all consistently applied—can prove enormously useful to beginners in steering their decisions and actions during their first years on the job.

If you were a new employee at Monster Cable Products, Inc., for example, on your first day you would be handed a single laminated sheet called Monster Mottos. These are the company's operating principles and procedures as spelled out by visionary founder and head monster Dr. Noel Lee. Here is a sampling of the headings and some of the entries under each:

- Monsterous Business Strategy (Sooner is better than later.)
- Monsterous Personal Skills (Do what you say you are going to do within the time you say you are going to do it.)
- Monsterous Judgment (Find out what you don't know, that is, the root cause: Don't just treat the symptom; cure the disease.)

Mentoring: Invaluable

Among a journalist's first assignments was covering city council meetings. What did she know about the city council or its meetings? Nothing. So what did she do? She was smart enough to know if she just plowed her way ignorantly through the assignment, she could miss something and her report would be neither accurate nor newsworthy. Rather than quietly taking a seat at the back of the room like many beginners would, she "walked into the city council meeting and announced to everybody there, 'This is my first day on the job, and I don't know anything. Please help me.' And they did."⁷

It is uncharacteristic for beginners to ask for help. No one likes to admit ignorance. But the cub reporter asked those with experience

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for help—and got it. She did not remain a beginner for long. In fact, that reporter went on to become one of the most successful individuals in broadcast history. No one would have known her on that first assignment; but today, Oprah Winfrey is one of the most familiar faces on television.

As a beginning reporter, Winfrey realized that the importance of guidance and demonstrations from experienced professionals cannot be overstated. If we can't learn by doing, we can learn by observing. On the other hand, learning by listening is not a high-impact learning strategy for beginners: People need to be shown how it is done, not told. A good mentor has a longer-lasting effect on a person than any training manual or lecture. So, beginners who have not “been there, done that” should find people who have and learn from their experiences.

Going Beyond Beginner

You need to do more than just spend time on the job to become more skilled. You need to learn from your experiences and gain a great deal more knowledge to reduce mistakes and increase successes. Combining experience with activities such as reflective practice, journal writing, professional meetings, reading, and networking with colleagues can help beginners gain knowledge and insight. This purposeful and sustained effort to improve increases your level of expertise—nothing less. When you work deliberately to learn from experience, gain more knowledge, and improve your skills, you do not remain a beginner for long.

In the next chapter, the characteristics that signal the rise from beginner to capable performer are identified and described. Prepare to take that step by completing expertise exercises 5–7.

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Summary

Beginner performers

- Behave in ways that are rational, procedural, and inflexible
- Make decisions guided by rules and norms
- Do not feel responsible for the outcomes of their actions
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EXPERTISE EXERCISE 5

IDENTIFYING RULES TO LIVE BY

Identify workplace or professional rules to live by that you might write for beginners in your workplace.

Rules to live by at

(your organization)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

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EXPERTISE EXERCISE 7

MEETING MENTORS

Identify someone or some people in your workplace you would consider approaching as a mentor. Identify the characteristics and skills they possess that you would most like to possess as well.

Person 1: _____

Characteristics: _____

Skills: _____

Person 2: _____

Characteristics: _____

Skills: _____

Person 3: _____

Characteristics: _____

Skills: _____
