

MANAGEMENT

OPINION

You need to cast off your shell if you want to continue to grow

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SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Merge Gupta-Sunderji, a Leadership & Workplace Communication Expert in her Calgary home in 2008.

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Several times in its life, a lobster casts off its shell. This is an instinctive process, occurring each time the lobster realizes it has reached a point of crisis. The lobster's shell is a hard exoskeleton, designed to protect and nurture the

lobster as it grows. But this same shell becomes a hindrance when it begins to inhibit the lobster's growth. Ultimately, the lobster has no choice. In order to continue to grow and develop, it needs to discard its old shell and grow a new one. So it does.

This process takes about two days. Two days may not seem like a very long time, but it is if you're a lobster. Two days, naked and vulnerable in the ocean, can be an eternity. In two days, the lobster could become another ocean creature's lunch. In two days, the relentless action of the waves could slam it against rocks and injure it. Yet, the lobster knows it has no alternative. To continue to mature and advance, it knows it must step outside its existing boundaries and take that risk. To do otherwise would mean stagnation. So the lobster casts off its shell.

It is the same with humans. In order for you to continue to grow and develop your mind and your abilities, to stay significant in the rapidly changing world of work, you need to be willing to step outside your comfort zone and take risks. You need to consciously choose to discard your shell and venture into areas in which you are not familiar. Continuous learning is not optional, it is essential. Otherwise you, too, will stagnate.

In order to stay relevant, you must be willing to push beyond the present, to actively seek out discomfort. Sure, job security in the context of lifetime employment is no longer the norm in today's business environment. But job security does exist in ways you might not have considered before.

Stepping outside your comfort zone and embracing continuous learning is what gives you job security. The more you know and can do, the more you can contribute to the success of your organization and the greater your value to your employer. And should your present employer not recognize your significant value, your improved performance makes you valuable to other employers, or if you so choose, gives you the foundation to fuel your entrepreneurial spirit by creating your own venture.

So what does it mean to continuously learn?

Be a sponge

Take every opportunity you can to soak up new information. The more you absorb, the more you set yourself up for sustained success. Read, ask questions, attend training courses. Find yourself a mentor either within or outside your organization who will teach you the things that you need to aspire and attain your goals. Constantly think about what you are going to learn next.

Keep an open mind

New learning comes in many different shapes, sizes and forms, and sometimes from the most unusual places. Often, when you hear something new or different, your natural reaction may be to immediately discount it. You believe that the person giving you this information doesn't know you, where you work, the challenges you face, nor the people with whom you work. You don't believe they can give you any valuable insight into your situation. Keeping an open mind is about overcoming this.

Connect with people

Your interactions with people will help you grow and develop your mind and abilities. Understand and harness the power of networking. Networking is much more than simply making acquaintances over pleasant conversation at a conference or social gathering. Nor is it an exchange of business cards followed by vague promises to keep in touch. Seek out opportunities to develop long-term relationships for mutual benefit. In your conversations, look for ways to not only help people, but also to connect them with others. Be generous in sharing your knowledge and resources with others. Appreciate that networking is based on reciprocity, and you will gain exponentially.

Continuous learning gives your career and life flexibility. It puts you in the driver's seat and makes it easier for you to move in new directions – either within or outside your current organization. Continuing learning means that you will always be relevant, no matter what the changes are in your working environment.

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