



# How Leaders Infuse Learning into the Organization's DNA

by Chip R. Bell

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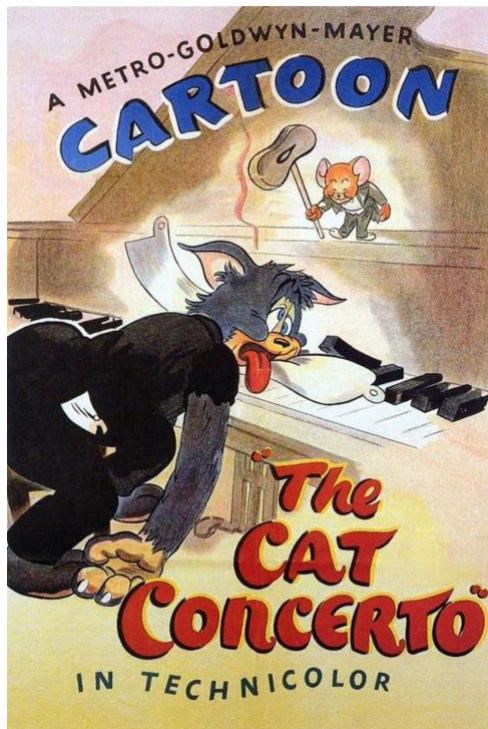


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"Leaders are more powerful role models when they learn than when they teach," wrote former Harvard Business School professor Rosabeth Moss Kantor.

"The Cat Concerto" is an MGM animated Tom and Jerry cartoon in which Tom plays Franz Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2. Jerry is the mouse who lives inside the grand piano. Musical supervisor Scott Bradley went to school on the classical piece and filmed Calvin Jackson playing it. Every minute detail in the cartoon exactly matched Jackson's fingering and movement. The cartoon not only won the 1946 Oscar for Best Short Subject, but it introduced millions of people to classical music in a way they never appreciated.

Renowned pianist Lang Lang claimed the Tom & Jerry cartoon was the inspiration for his learning to play the piano.

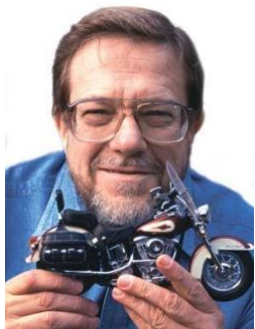
As the half-life of knowledge (the gap between skill acquisition and skill obsolescence) shortens, leaders cannot afford to stop learning or inspiring learning. Learning organizations are more adaptive, more innovative, and more successful. Royal Dutch Shell executive Arie De Geus wrote: "Your ability to learn faster than your competition is your only sustainable competitive advantage." Like musician

Scott Bradley, great leaders are passionate about learning and making learners of those they lead. Here are four features of leaders who make learning a key part of their leadership.

## **Redefine Classroom**

Technology has democratized access to important knowledge. AI is now redefining where and how that knowledge takes hold. The traditional classroom is no longer the seat of learning. Winning organizations make learning accessible to every associate anywhere, anytime. AI-driven, mobile-based learning puts the most advanced skill-building programs in associates' hands, even placing a coach within reach 24/7. It can run performance assessments that ensure learners transfer learning from the device to the job, closing the gap where so much corporate training fails. Content updates happen in real time ensuring only the best and most relevant information is provided. Perhaps more importantly, it can be done in a fashion that excites learners about learning, leaving them eager to return for more. "The mind is not a vessel to be filled," wrote philosopher Plutarch, "but a fire to be kindled."

## **No Know-It-All**



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When Rich Teerlink was CEO of Harley-Davidson, he started most meetings with the phrase, "Here's something I screwed up this week, and what I learned from it." His goal was to communicate the vital perspective that learning was more valuable than knowing. Similarly, when Satya Nadella assumed the role of Microsoft CEO, he championed a shift from "know it all" to "learn it all," a philosophy that fostered a culture that emphasized collaboration, empathy, and a "continuous growth mindset."

This shift enabled Microsoft to more quickly embrace cloud computing and AI, giving Microsoft a competitive advantage. Marketing guru Seth Godin said, "We've been trained to prefer being right to learning something, to prefer passing the test to making a difference." Teerlink and Nadella both sought to make a difference.

## **Learn Out Loud**

Learning leaders demonstrate their passion for learning by constantly asking managers and associates questions about customers' experiences, project progress, and new business ventures. Their query is borne of a sincere interest and a deep

curiosity, not a “checkup” inquisition. When someone asked Berkshire Hathaway CEO Warren Buffett about the path to getting smarter, he held up a stack of papers and gave this simple advice: read 500 pages weekly. Buffet spends 80% of his day reading and thinking. “The test isn't whether you get the greatest business idea in the world the first time out,” he wrote, “the test is whether you keep learning as you go along.” Knowledge, he explained, compounds like interest. Buffett's “learn out loud” approach makes it tangibly evident that continuous learning is important.



Photo by Bonnie Schiffman via Getty

## Fail Forward



Photo by A. Valigorsky via Getty

The biggest deterrent to continuous learning is the fear of failure and the anxiety over the consequences. “Fear of looking inadequate makes people feign understanding, which inhibits growth,” wrote best-selling author Dr Brene Brown. Learning leaders shift the paradigm to view failure as a valuable opportunity rather than a trigger for rebuke or critique.

“Failing forward is the ability to get back up after you've been knocked down, learn from your mistake, and move forward in a better direction,” wrote best-selling author Dr. John Maxwell. Since learning is a door opened only from the inside, wise organizations make learning a source of pride, a trigger of recognition, and the primary criteria for upward mobility. In such an environment, learners eagerly open the door to valuable learning.

Learning leaders learn for learning’s sake—they get an adrenaline rush out of always honing their skills, enhancing their understanding, and deepening their wisdom. Learning leaders are restless, hungry souls, never satisfied with what they know, because they appreciate that antiquated is just around the corner and obsolete is just down the hall. They daily live the philosophy voiced by philosopher Eric Hoffer: “In times of change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.”

## About Chip Bell



Chip R. Bell is a renowned keynote speaker and the author of several award winning, best-selling books. Global Gurus in 2025 ranked him for the eleventh year in a row in the top dozen keynote speakers in the world on customer experience. He is also senior advisor with On3, Inc., a company that specializes in mobile based, AI-driven field learning programs, as well as an instructor with Fuel (myfuel.io). He can be reached at [www.chipbell.com](http://www.chipbell.com).