Succeeding as a Self-Directed, Self-Paced Learner...

Are you expected to be a self-directed, self-paced learner? Did you hear the news? It was announced in the last staff meeting: "Employees, you can now take responsibility for your own career development."

- You are empowered to learn and grow in your career.
- You have the opportunity and tools to develop your knowledge and skills to the fullest potential. We will continue to provide resources and training opportunities, and there will continue to be some required training. But, beyond that you can groom your own career.
- Your career development will be integrated into performance management, team building, and your compensation profile.

There are many benefits to this scenario, including the fact that this frees each of us to pursue our own choices of career growth and development. Some of us have been expected to be self-directed, self-paced learners for years. Some of us do this well. However, many of us are unprepared for the freedom this offers, having spent many years in learning systems that defined learning activities, objectives, and outcomes for us. With this freedom, we must learn how to learn, how to set our own goals, and how to pace ourselves to avoid chronic procrastination.

What does a self-directed, self-paced learner look and act like? In order to be successful self-directed, self-paced learners, we must understand some basics about the process of learning and how successful learners behave. Compare yourself to the description below.

- **Metacognition**: Understanding one's own learning processes.

The successful learner is flexible in using a repertoire of learning strategies to master new material, is able to assess own learning needs, is able to assess the effectiveness of own learning strategies and to make appropriate changes.

- **Motivation**: Attitude towards studying.
The successful learner strives to do well, feels responsible for own success or failure, sets realistic goals, prioritizes tasks, is disciplined enough to complete tasks, carefully selects time and environment for study in an effort to optimize learning time.

- **Acquisition**: Selection and understanding of appropriate information and processes presented in the learning situation.

The successful learner develops good reading and note taking skills, is able to identify pertinent information in the presentation; reviews, rehearses and applies newly learned skills through techniques such as restating in own words, identifying personal examples, teaching it to someone else, etc.

- **Retention**: Ability to recall material.

The successful learner practices or reviews content at regular intervals to enhance retention, makes it meaningful through labeling, associations, etc., and recognizes how concepts fit into the whole.

- **Performance**: Demonstrates understanding of material in real life application.

The successful learner is able to apply new material to appropriate situations, generalizes knowledge from one situation to another, analyzes performance and modifies strategies accordingly.

**Do you understand your own learning processes?**

Whole Brain Learning theory recognizes that each of us have preferred ways to learn but notes that learning is most effective and retained the longest when we use both sides and many components of our brain compared to when we receive information targeted at only one area of the brain. Use the list below to identify your preferred learning strategies and ways you can compensate in other learning environments to bring in the influence of your whole brain. If you apply your preferred learning methods when you are in situations that require alternative learning styles, you can potentially increase retention and application of the newly learned content.
**When learning, I most enjoy:**

- **Analyzer**
  Acquiring facts, analysis, thinking through ideas, critiquing, reasoning, and reviewing case studies.

  Compensate by reviewing research, discussion with experts, applying critical thinking and logic to evaluate material presented.

- **Explorer**
  Intuitive insights, using my imagination, playing around with ideas, day dreaming, getting the big picture, informal structure and climate. Compensate by participating in and encouraging brainstorming, creativity, and metaphors. Create illustrations and recognize patterns and designs.

- **Organizer**
  Structured content and agenda, step-by-step instructions and flow of information, time to evaluate theories and practice skills, time to verify my understanding of the information. Compensate by outlining, creating checklists, summaries and flowcharts.

- **Sensor**
  Talking about new ideas and sharing experiences, hands on activities, doing role playing, hearing stories and internalizing the material. Compensate by encouraging or participating in group discussions, role playing, sharing ideas and interviewing others.

**My preferred learning methods include:**

- **Auditory**: tell me about it; let me discuss it with you.

  Compensate by reading out loud, discussing content with others, re-verbalizing key points.

- **Visual**: show me pictures, graphs, photos, actions.

  Compensate by creating or using visual representations of content or visualizing the task being described, picturing material in your mind's eye, re-reading content several times, identifying whole concepts and relationships to contextual cues.
• **Kinesthetic**: let me get my hands on it and do it.

Compensate by writing and re-writing notes and key points or by acting out tasks. Are you motivated to learn?

One of the easiest things for us to do is to sabotage ourselves by not approaching a learning moment with the right attitude. We cannot fool our brains and if we feel material is a waste of time or irrelevant, we will not remember it.

There will always be things to learn which are of considerable interest to us, and things which we must learn that may not be of significant interest. We can improve our ability to learn by recognizing that we control our attitudes. When we put forth the effort to approach a learning activity positively, prepare to learn, and believe we will come away with something valuable, we find it easier to learn. The best way to do this is to get involved, ask questions and participate in the process in order to walk away with something that makes it worth the time and effort.

Is there a cheat sheet for being a successful self-directed, self-paced learner? Yes! It is easy to do; it simply requires a little discipline and planning (which may not be so easy for some of us).

1. Start by establishing your learning goals for a specific period of time—you need something to track against. If this is going to be used for performance management, team building and your compensation profile, it is best to get right to the point and figure out how to get the biggest bang for your study hour to meet those needs and your career goals as well. Goals can be simple but should be specific, measurable, achievable, reasonable, and time oriented. An example may be: "Thoroughly understand the causes, effects, interventions and implications for patient education in the management of autonomic dysreflexia by June 5. This will be demonstrated by changes in my care and education/documentation and my ability to teach orientees this concept."

2. Prioritize your goals and recognize your own accountability and responsibility for achieving them. Develop a can do attitude.

3. Take advantage of or establish a convenient study location that is conducive to learning. This means an environment that has no distracters, good lighting, and comfortable seating, and readily available study tools.

4. Determine a time for studying. Make sure you are fresh and ready to learn. Study for 10 to 30 minutes in consistent, focused sessions. Begin each activity prepared and with a desire to learn.

5. Make sure you are clear about objectives and goals of a learning session before starting so efforts are focused towards the correct goal.
6. Use appropriate tools to increase retention. Do it right the first time so you do not waste time doing it over. There are many methods for increasing retention of information—several have been noted in the compensatory mechanisms above. Another tip for increasing retention is to look at material again for brief 10 minute sessions in a timed pattern over the first 30 days after exposure to the material: within 3-6 hours after exposure, 24 hours later, 48 hours later, one week later, 2 weeks later and 4 weeks later.

7. Study with a buddy and stay on task. Discussion and debate with a buddy can increase retention of newly learned material significantly. And it can assist you to keep up with your commitments.

Being a successful self-directed, self-paced learner simply requires the establishment of a different pattern of learning which places each of us in a leadership role for our own growth and development. It is exciting and motivating. As the saying goes, "Where are you going to go today?"