

Life-long Learning for Missionary Leaders

Rick Mann, Ph.D.
President
Crown College

I am finishing up this article as I sit in a hotel in Beijing, China. It was over 25 years ago that I first came to Beijing for a summer of Chinese language study. Three years later, our family moved to China for long-term work. I am amazed at how much Beijing and China has changed over these two decades. In today's complex and changing world, it is also imperative that strategic leaders also change through the continual engagement of life-long learning. With such engagement, leaders can ensure that they will not only understand the world around them, be able to add value through their leadership, but will also be able to build the capacity of those they lead.

Key Paradigms

Rather than giving a laundry list of opportunities for continued life-long learning, I believe it is important to understand some key paradigms related to life, learning and leadership. In the following section, I highlight the ones that I think are most important including:

- Staying in the “Zone”
- Moving from Content to Process
- Resourcing: A Constellation of Voices
- Resourcing: Formal, Informal, and Non-formal learning
- Resourcing: Three Levels of Focus

After addressing these key paradigms, we will then move to the last section of Next Steps.

Staying in the “Zone”

The Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, pioneered the concept of the “Zone of Proximal Development” or ZPD. The goal is to help every learner and leader stay in the “zone” of maximal learning. At every stage of development, we want to organize learning experiences for ourselves and others that can tap into what the learner and leader already knows as well as not over-reaching his or her abilities in a way that is counter-productive. In more practical terms, we can ask, “What can I and others do this year to stretch me into the next level of growth and development?” If we are under-challenged, our continued growth will be stilted. If we are over-challenged, fear, confusion, and/or stress will keep us from growing as we could.

Moving from Content to Process

In the past, it was common for learners and emerging leaders to focus almost exclusively on areas of content. Ministry leaders would study theology, a language, a country, youth, etc. This worked well with static groups, locations, and organizations. However, in reality pastors began studying theology in seminary and then would spend a lifetime leading in the local church trying to figure out culture, strategy, personal transformation, and facilities along the way. In the past, a missionary would move to one

country, learn one language, work with one people group with one ministry strategy. In today’s world, leaders are being called up to be much more versatile, flexible, and mobile.

Today, things are changing so fast that these past approaches are not as effective as they once were. This has led to a greater focus on process rather than content. For example, rather than focusing on a discipline (e.g. theology), people group (e.g. children), or country (e.g. Japan), we focus on the development of life-long processes such as strategy, culture, evangelism, learning, change, etc. Another example would be a youth pastor. Rather than just training the pastor in theology and youth ministry, the pastor needs to be equipped in culture and contextualization, prayer and evangelism, leading and change.

The following chart gives a picture of how the top row represents historical content while the column on the left lists key processes.

Process Content->	Theology	Music	Children	Youth	Adult	Church	US	Bolivia	Japan
Prayer									
Planning									
Strategy									
Finance									
Vision									
Evangelism									
Pastoral Care									
Leading Change									
Personnel									
Culture									
Contextualization									

This is not to say that we should entirely move from the top row to the left column, but rather it is a matter of priority and application. Today’s leaders need to be equipped in planning and then he or she will apply these skills to a ministry, organization, people group, and/or country. A leader needs to understand issues of personnel and then give leadership in his/her local context. Almost any book you read today focuses on left column topics rather than exclusively on top line content.

Resourcing: A Constellation of Voices

In my opinion and experience, the development of leaders is best accomplished through a hand-crafted process. To accomplish this process, a variety of voices are needed. In reference to mentoring, Bobby Clinton, refers to this as a constellation of voices. Whether it is coaching, reading, coursework, or conversation, our strongest opportunities for growth come when we include a variety of others. I may seek one voice that can help me to get more organized. I may seek a different voice in helping with my marriage.

Resourcing Learners and Leaders: Formal, Non-formal, and Informal Learning

As we frame out the topics above, we now come to point where we seek to access available resources that will help leaders to meet the challenges around them. The goal here is three-fold:

- Staying in the Zone: Each year, stretching ourselves and others in key areas
- Building capacity in key processes:
- Leveraging different learning resources

In other words, our goal is to stretch the leader in new areas of growth, build strength in new process understanding. This can be accomplished by leveraging the opportunities available. These opportunities can be parsed across the following matrix.

	Formal	Non-formal	Informal
Personal	Spiritual Formation	Getting Things Done Seminar	
Professional		Raising Financial Support	Reading
Organizational	Course: Organizational Communication		

Across the top, we see the different context or modalities of learning opportunities. Down the left column, we see the different domains in which learning can be applied. Let’s further unpack this two-dimensional matrix.

Experts have divided learning experiences into three different types. These include formal classroom settings, Informal but still structured opportunities, and non-formal experiences.

Formal

For centuries, students have learned in classrooms found in schools. Experts called teachers and/or professors have led the process. While this opportunity continues today, the diversity of Formal learning is most associated with schools and courses. In today’s world, classrooms setting are less age-specific. In other words, college, seminary, and graduate schools are filled with a wider range of students. Adults are going back to college in record numbers. Similarly, the modalities of instruction are more varied. Today’s courses are not just offered in a M-W-F, 15-week format. Courses are being offered on campuses as well as online and/or a combination of both. Courses are being offered on weekends, in short-course formats, and through individualized instruction. While courses are still being taught by professors, the instruction is more interactive, field-based, and leveraging a wider variety of resources to increase learning.

Today, virtually every leader has courses within reach. A leader in Europe could take a local course in the national language and/or English. A leader in Atlanta could take a course online at a hundred different institutions. Leaders can travel to a destination to take a short course with other experienced leaders.

The advantages of formal course are that they can lead toward a recognized, accredited credential that can leverage the leaders present and future opportunities.

Suggestions:

- Explore coursework related to your area of interests and needs.
- Remember that courses now come in many more formats than in the past.
- Take coursework that leads toward a degree.
- Don’t underestimate the value of a completed degree in influencing others and opening doors of leadership opportunities.
- Degrees supplement your leadership. They are not leadership in and of themselves.

Non-formal

In contrast to formal educational opportunities found in courses through schools, non-formal learning opportunities are structured, non-credit experiences such as seminars, conferences, training courses, etc. The advantage of non-formal learning experiences is that they are often focused on specific areas of need and taught by practicing professionals who have specific expertise in the area being addressed.

Suggestions:

- Ask those around you what seminars are helpful and available
- Seminars and conferences are often helpful as a simple way for continued learning, particularly in technical areas that change rapidly.
- Helpful when pursuing a degree is not an option or helpful.

Informal

Informal learning experiences are those that come through individual reading, conversations, mentoring, coaching, observation, leadership experiences, etc. These everyday experiences can be invaluable as resources in continue, life-long learning.

Suggestions:

- Read regularly
- Pursue mentoring and coaching experiences
- Try to make sense of your leadership experiences both positive and negative.

Resourcing Learners and Learners: Levels of Focus

Personal

While all leaders benefit from growth experiences, it is key that we begin with personal growth. A leader will only be effective to the extent that his/her personal life is strong, purposed, and increasing in vitality

Suggestions:

- Ask those close to you what areas of growth they would suggest.
- Find people that you want to be like when you grow up and learn from them.
- Self-awareness is the hub from which all other personal growth extends.
- Relationships are a key resource in personal growth

Professional

Professional growth is often confused with organizational leadership. It is important for the leader to realize that professional growth is independent of organizational role. For example, writing and speaking well is a skill that transcends the organizational role of the person.

Suggestions:

- Focus on core professional competencies such as relationships, communication skills, time and task management, critical thinking, etc.
- Annual reviews can provide excellent feedback on areas of development.
- Compare your competencies with those that you want to emulate.

- Which instructional modalities (formal, non-formal, and informal) are you currently leveraging for your growth and development?
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Organizational

You add value to the mission of your organization when you lead your area well. Growth in this area is specific to your team, department, division, and/or organization is effective in reaching stated and agreed upon outcomes. For example, your senior leaders may be seeking to assess the effectiveness of the employees across the organization. You may need to learn more about assessing employee effectiveness (general professional development) and then learn how to implement these strategies in your area of influence/leadership (organizational effectiveness).

Suggestions

- Talk with your supervisor about areas of growth needed in your area of organizational leadership.

Next Steps Application Matrix

Finally, we have arrived at the area of application. The goal of this section is to develop an annual plan that can combine areas of focus with modalities of learning. Here are some examples:

- You want to take a course (formal) in the area of organizational planning (professional)
- Your boss says that you need mentoring (informal) in the area of conflict management (professional/organizational)
- You are the chair of the nursing program and you attend a seminar (non-formal) on the topic of nursing testing (organizational)
- You attend a Sunday School course (non-formal) at your church on the topic of prayer (personal).

	Formal	Non-formal	Informal
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Professional		Raising Financial Support	Reading
Organizational	Course: Organizational Communication		

The goal each year is to put together a plan that will help you to stay in the “zone” of growth and development. You want to focus on all through levels as you leverage all through modalities of learning.

Application Questions:

1. On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not even close, 3 = adequate, 5 = great, or perfectly), to what extent are you in the “zone” this year?
2. What key processes are most important for your present and future success? These could include planning, finance, raising resources, strategy, visioning, evaluation, etc.

3. What voices do you presently have in your life and leadership? This includes both names of specific people (Bob, Sue, etc.) as well as the area of voice (e.g. spiritual formation, leadership development, marriage and family, organizational effectiveness, cultural understanding for the country in which you work, etc.)
4. Which instructional modalities (formal, non-formal, and informal) are you currently leveraging for your growth and development?
5. Which level is development (personal, professional, and organizational) are you currently addressing the most? Which the least?
6. What are your 2-3 next steps? Consider picking one from each of the following category to create a blended plan. For example, you may want to focus **professional** growth in **planning** by taking a **formal online course** from a **professor** (see underlined, bolded selections below) On the hand, you may want to work on **personal character** growth through an **informal** relationship with **Bob**, your co-**worker**, through a monthly **face-to-face** meeting. Note that a grid has been included on the next page that can be photo-copied for each next step action plan.

Process	Voice	Modality	Delivery	Level
Visioning	<u>Professor</u>	<u>Formal</u>	<u>Face-to-face</u>	<u>Personal</u>
Strategizing	<u>Co-worker</u>	Non-formal	<u>Online</u>	<u>Professional</u>
<u>Planning</u>	Supervisor	<u>Informal</u>	Book	Organizational
Financing	Coach		Conversation	
Resourcing	Mentor		Blog	
Expanding	Author		Writing	
Spiritual growth	Seminar leader		Telephone	
<u>Character growth</u>	Friend		Email	

Name: _____

Next Step: _____ Date: _____

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Planning	Supervisor	Informal	Book	Organizational
Financing	Coach		Conversation	
Resourcing	Mentor		Blog	
Expanding	Author		Writing	
Spiritual growth	Seminar leader		Telephone	
Character growth	Friend		Email	