

By Barry O'Reilly

changes. Customer demands change. Yet people get stuck using the same behaviors and old paradigms. Why? Because they worked before. This is especially true for executives who've spent a lifetime honing their expertise. Learning new behaviors is not the problem for these executives. It's their inability to "unlearn" their existing behavior and mindset that is challenging because these are the very things that got them where they are today.

Unlearning does not mean that everything you know is suddenly irrelevant. It's not about forgetting or discounting your experience. Unlearning is a conscious act of letting go of once-useful mindsets and potentially outdated information and behaviors and opening yourself up to new information that will inform effective decision-making and action.

The framework for breaking the cycle of learned behaviors looks like this:

1. **Unlearn** the behaviors and mindsets that keep you and your business from moving forward.
2. **Relearn** new skills and strategies necessary for true transformation through safe experimentation.
3. **Breakthrough** old habits by opening up to new ideas and perspectives

The key is in recognizing that what you are doing is not working. You'll know that it's time to unlearn when you're not achieving your desired outcomes or living up to the expectations you set for yourself. Or, perhaps, you are avoiding certain challenges altogether. Fear of change or fear of failure is also a strong indicator for the need to unlearn.

## A SAFE PLACE TO EXPERIMENT

Once you recognize that it's time to unlearn, you need to create a safe space to relearn new behaviors and experiment to find the ones that will move you toward the outcomes you're aiming for. Nobody likes to do things they suck at, especially in front of an audience. When you're an

"Don't they understand how mobile contracts work?" That would have been the expected response from an executive who spent a lifetime in the industry. Instead, Legere knew intuitively that he needed to "unlearn" what he knew about contracts so he could truly hear and act on the feedback he was receiving. Not long after, he introduced the world's first no-contract, fixed-pricing mobile service and crushed his competition, forever transforming the industry.

## TRANSFORMATION STARTS AT THE TOP

Transformation. Digital Disruption. Call it what you will, the terms have been so over-used you'd be forgiven for believing it just marketing hype. But the threat is real. Thanks in large part to digital-native upstarts, the average lifespan of an S&P 500 company has shrunk from 60 years to less than 20. In fact, only 15 percent of the Fortune 500 from 50 years ago remain on the list today. That's why 85 percent of organizations across a wide variety of industries have embarked on their own digital transformation journeys. Sadly, according to a recent IDC study, only seven percent can be classified as digital transformation leaders. Why is that?

Because transformation is less about technology and more about business model disruption—and that means imagination and the courage to think and act differently—and that must start at the very top.

Everyone talks about companies being disrupted, but it's really the leaders of those companies that get disrupted because they are holding onto legacy behaviors or outdated thinking and methods—meanwhile, the world is innovating around them. The world changes. Technology

## Unlearn



executive, you're exposed—thousands of people are watching your every move—so, when you fall on your face, the pain is magnified. We created our ExecCamp workshops as a safe place where executives challenge themselves, get outside their comfort zone, break existing models and behaviors, and experiment with new ones. In essence, executives leave their companies for several weeks with the explicit goal of inventing a new business that will disrupt their existing one. As a byproduct, they end up disrupting themselves.

Getting away from your day-to-day routine helps break the calcification of the environment that you're in. People tend to have automatic responses to familiar situations. They hear certain keywords or recognize familiar situations and respond almost automatically. When you take people out of their environment it gives them a chance to reimagine new behaviors and experiment in a way that is safe to fail.

### UNLEARNING CAN BE TAUGHT BUT CHANGE MUST BE EXPERIENCED

In traditional leadership education, we push leaders into these one-day innovation off sites or week-long programs and push ideas onto them and expect them to come back with changed behavior. But change comes from experiencing the results of new, learned behaviors first hand. And to learn something new, you need to be willing to unlearn what you already know.

We had the leadership team from one of the top airline groups in the world in one of our ExecCamps. Their senior leader was a 20-year veteran in the industry, a real expert. He had this idea for how they could transform their booking platform—all they needed to do was get the team back in the office to build it. They didn't know it at the time, but this was exactly the type of old behavior that they needed to unlearn—pushing their ideas onto the team as well as onto the market. So, we built a prototype of the platform and shared it with actual customers. Guess what? The customers didn't get it. Sticking with old patterns, the exec said, "Must have been the wrong customers. Bring me the right customers." So, we brought in more customers. The same thing happened. We had to do this four times before the lead exec finally admitted that it wasn't the customers. His idea didn't work. He walked away understanding that pushing his own ideas was a personal blind spot; it may have worked for him in the past, but it wasn't working now. But he had to go through the process of trying his tried-and-true behaviors before recognizing the fallacy in it.

### WHAT CAN YOU DO TO BEGIN YOUR OWN UNLEARNING JOURNEY

Not everyone is able to step away from their businesses for weeks or months at a time—although I highly recommend finding the time. In the meantime, here are some things you can do, and the mindset you should adopt to begin your own successful unlearning transformation:

- **Reignite your curiosity**  
In order to change, it's important to be curious. When you send someone off to solve a problem and they come back with a contrary view to your own, do you shut them down or ask them why? It's important to recognize that the goal is not to be right but to find the right answers. By being curious and always asking "why?" you begin to view your beliefs as merely hypotheses to be tested. Then you can develop a system where you design experiments to test your assumptions, get new and better information, and find out what really works.
- **Think big but start small**  
People fear failure, but they really shouldn't. Failure is merely a signal that we're not on the right path. We need to course correct. So, to make trying new things feel less risky, I tell clients to think big about what they want to unlearn, but start small as you relearn and experiment with lots of different behaviors. Starting small creates recoverable situations so when you make a mistake, you're not blowing up the farm. By tackling these small changes leading up to the "big thinking" outcome you're shooting for, you also create opportunities for people to feel success along the way.
- **Take ownership of the problem**  
When things aren't going well and you're not achieving your desired outcomes, tell your team "it's not you, it's me." And mean it. Transformation begins with you. If change isn't happening, you must hold yourself accountable rather than fall back on the all-too-common practice of blaming failure on circumstance or someone else.
- **Become a role model**  
You don't need to have all the answers. Many employees model the behaviors they witness in their leaders. When they see executives who are being vulnerable, curious, and open to experimentation, it becomes a very powerful accelerant throughout the entire company.

- **Get comfortable with being uncomfortable**  
To truly transform, you're going to have to experiment with behaviors that are difficult or new for you. You will struggle at first. That may feel uncomfortable but it's a discomfort you need to commit to if you want to succeed. By actively trying new things and putting yourself in situations where you are getting outside of your comfort zone, new opportunities and personal growth inevitably follow.
- **Don't ever stop**  
Unlearning is hard work. Just when you feel like nothing is going to work is the time to accelerate your rate of experimentation and find the breakthrough you've been looking for. One of my favorite quotes from one of our camp participants came from the chief digital officer at IAG. He said, "When 97% of people think that you should stop doing what you're doing and just revert back to what's comfortable—that's when the breakthrough journey really begins."

### IT'S NOT ONE AND DONE

One of the dangers of becoming an expert with 20+ years of experience is that your knowledge becomes an inhibitor for you to change. All your feedback mechanisms are telling you that you must be doing the right things because you've been elevated in the company to an executive position. But when you rely solely on past achievements you immediately put yourself at risk of outdated thinking and practices that will no longer work.

I have seen this method of unlearning, relearning, and breakthrough work time and again with business leaders at some of the largest companies in the world. But you don't unlearn once and then you're done. If you embark on this journey—and I hope you do—you will learn that unlearning is an ongoing, recursive and virtuous system the more you use it.

Breakthrough

Relearn

Breakthrough

Unlearn

Relearn