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Challenge Yourself and Get Input from Others

By *Harrison Barnes*

One of the keys to being successful in anything is seeking the input of others. Those who are at the top of their game in just about every discipline are experts at taking criticism and feedback from others. Not only are they experts in seeking criticism—they actively seek out situations where they are going to be challenged and criticized.

Think about the newspaper and the stories that are there every day. A good portion of the stories are about business executives and politicians, for example. These executives and politicians are continually being deconstructed, criticized and attacked by the writers in the newspaper. Each day when I read the paper I am amazed at the level of criticism being labeled on various public figures. If I were the President and picked up the paper each day, I think I might reach the conclusion that the whole world hates me on a daily basis. Papers are full of criticism of our leaders.

A politician or executive chooses to be in the limelight and chooses to be continually deconstructed by the press. Coincidentally, the people you read about in the paper are also traditionally the people with the longest history of achievement. They have held the best jobs in their communities and done well all their lives. The point is that the higher they go ... the more they end up being attacked and criticized.

Many presidents and CEOs leave their jobs with their tails between their legs after being attacked like mad once they finally reach the pinnacle of their profession. What is so amazing about this is that it is the highest performers in our society and the people who achieve the most that also face the most criticism.

In order to be successful, you need to be prepared for, and take a ton of criticism.

In my career, the absolute highest performers and the best people I have worked with have been the people who sought the most input. Instead of believing they knew everything, these people were malleable and interested in learning about what they did wrong, how they could improve—and always were interested in confronting their weaknesses.

When I talk to high performers I am continually amazed. They push themselves physically, mentally and every way they possibly can.

- One I spoke with a few days ago was training for a marathon—and another was training for a triathlon.
- Another was studying for a master's degree at night—despite being in a job that was paying over $750,000 a year.

These high performers continually amaze me in terms of the lengths they will go to challenge themselves. They want to be strong and have minds that refuse to confront limits. They train themselves to be strong.

High performers surround themselves with people who are likely to challenge them. They seek out jobs which are likely to challenge them. They seek out situations where they are likely to get positive or negative feedback. They never accept limits.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks I have seen to the success of others is an inability to work with others to get stuff done. High performers actively seek the input of others in just about everything that they do. They want this input because they know that without it they will not have accurate information to make decisions. When you seek the input of others you will learn about approaches and information with which you may not be familiar.

Do you know some really intelligent people? I know some people who are so smart it would blow your socks off. They have PhDs from Princeton, have written some incredible papers about math theorems and more. Some people are so intelligent it is hard to believe. But the people I am talking about are not politicians or important people out there in the world. The people I am thinking about have not done much of anything with their careers and lives. When you meet them they will talk to you about all sorts of things and they certainly are intelligent. Nevertheless, they are not interested in what others think. They are so smart they think that they know what to do and can reach their own conclusions without the input of anyone else at all.

The danger in being someone who knows everything is that you close yourself off to others' observations. When you close yourself off to others' observations you put yourself in a situation where you stop learning. Setting yourself up for criticism and learning from others helps stimulate thinking processes and gives you insights that you simply would not get if you were doing something alone.

Group Problem Solving, an interesting textbook written by social scientist and professor at the University of Illinois, Patrick R. Laughlin, discusses that groups cooperating can solve problems far better than individuals can. According to Laughlin:

We found that groups of size three, four, and five outperformed the best individuals and attribute this performance to the ability of people to work together to generate and adopt correct responses, reject erroneous responses, and effectively process information.

The problem is that the smartest and most capable individuals believe that by virtue of their experience, skill and so forth, they do not need to seek the input of others. In some respects, many of the smartest people believe that seeking help is a sign of weakness.

To be the best at anything, you need to seek out lots of input from others and put yourself in a situation where you are likely to be critiqued and can experience cooperation with others.

For the past several years, at 8:00 am every morning, I have held a staff meeting with various managers in our company. When we first started doing these meetings, I found them a little "off putting" because in the meetings weaknesses in our company and other issues would constantly be highlighted. Groups of managers would point out one thing or another that we were doing wrong and could improve on and it was a source of discomfort.

Notwithstanding, for years I have held these meetings and we rarely miss a day of them. Most of the solutions to the issues our companies face are proposed by our staff and because of these meetings the companies operate effectively, are able to

respond to issues as they come up and remain competitive. Every member of our staff is our "'eyes and ears" to the world and gives us insights into what is going on. There is nothing more important to us than these meetings and they are extremely useful in forcing me and the companies to continually adjust.

Many people go see "coaches" on an ongoing basis to get insights. Other people go to "mastermind" groups where they talk through issues in a group forum. I think this sort of stuff is a great idea because it helps give us insights and solve the problems we are facing. There is nothing more important than getting others' feedback into what we are doing so that we can improve. If you arrange for regular input from others you can expect to improve in all respects.

THE LESSON

Seeking outside input, and taking feedback and criticism from others are crucial components of your success. The most successful people not only seek criticism, but seek situations in which they will be challenged and criticized, and surround themselves with people who are likely to challenge them. Arranging for regular input from others will help you improve in all respects.