

## ***The Learning Executive***

Jim Collins, the celebrated author of several best selling business books, penned an article for Inc. magazine more than a decade ago about becoming a learning person that seems even more relevant in today's constantly changing global environment.

As he admitted at the time, he did not consider himself as much of a learning person as he'd like to be, driven rather by an urge to perform, accomplish, achieve, and get things done. But as he began to consciously filter everything through a learning lens, he found both dramatic and subtle differences in the way he did things and spent his time.

Collins notes that John W. Gardner, author of the classic book *Self-Renewal: The Individual and Innovative Society*, best captured the spirit of the true learning person with his admonition "Don't set out in life to be an interesting person; set out to be an interested person." Learning people, learn till the day they die, not because learning will get them somewhere, but because they see learning as a primary reason for living.

Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart viewed himself not as a definitive expert on retailing but as a lifelong student of his trade, always asking questions and taking every opportunity to learn. A Brazilian businessman relates the story about writing to 10 U.S. retailing CEOs asking for an appointment after he'd purchased a discount retailing chain in South America. Only Walton said yes. "We didn't know much about retailing, so we wanted to talk to executives who knew the business," he explained. "Most didn't bother to reply, but Sam did. Only later did I realize he was as interested in learning from us as we were in learning from him; he peppered us with questions about Brazil. Later, we launched a joint venture with Wal-Mart in South America."

Becoming a learning person involves responding to every situation with learning in mind, as Walton did. But it also requires setting explicit learning objectives. Look at your personal list of long-term objectives, mid-term objectives, and your current to-do list. How many items fall into the performance category and how many fall into the learning category? Most people use to-do lists. They're a useful mechanism for getting things done. A true learning person also has a "to-learn" list, and the items on that list carry at least as much weight in how one organizes their time as the to-do list.

The link between learning and performance is self-evident, but for a true learning person, performance is not the ultimate why of learning. Learning is the why of learning. Consider how your life would be different if you organized your time, energy, and resources around the objective of learning, instead of around performance.