



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H02FGB  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
OCTOBER 16, 2015

## **ARTICLE** **EDUCATION**

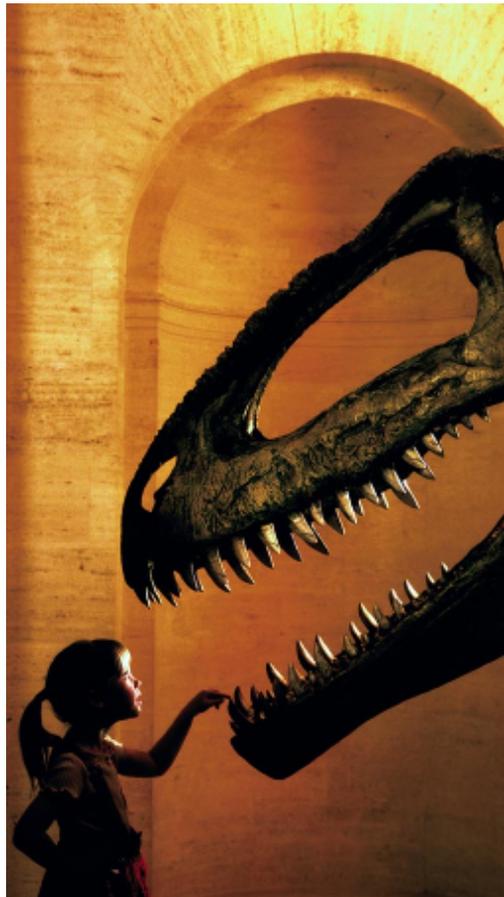
# The Best Leaders Are Constant Learners

*by Kenneth Mikkelsen and Harold Jarche*

EDUCATION

# The Best Leaders Are Constant Learners

by Kenneth Mikkelsen and Harold Jarche  
OCTOBER 16, 2015



As Juan Manuel Fangio exited the chicane before the blind Tabac corner in the 1950 Monaco Grand Prix, he stomped on the brake. It was a counterintuitive reaction for a racing driver exiting a corner – but one that likely saved his life. By slowing down he avoided plowing into a multi-car pile-up, which was just out of sight beyond the turn. In racing folklore, Fangio’s evasive action is considered a miracle. But why did he slow down?

The day before the race, Fangio had seen a photograph of a similar accident in 1936. As he approached Tabac, he noticed something about the crowd – an unusual color. Fangio realized that, instead of seeing their faces, he was seeing the backs of their heads. Something further down the road had to be attracting their attention. That made him recall the photograph.

Like Fangio, leaders must scan the world for signals of change, and be able to react instantaneously. We live in a world that increasingly requires what psychologist Howard Gardner calls [searchlight intelligence](#). That is, the ability to connect the dots between people and ideas, where others see no possible connection. An informed perspective is more important than ever in order to anticipate what comes next and succeed in emerging futures.

As the saying goes, “The best way to predict the future is to create it.” But how can business leaders make meaning of a playing field that is constantly changing shape?

### **The Best Leaders are the Best Learners**

To find their way in societal shifts, leaders cannot rely on static maps, nor can they hope to manage complexity through fixating on the details. To do so would be to fall into the trap described by Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares in their 1946 short story “[On Exactitude in Science](#),” in which empire cartographers draw up a map so detailed – the scale is a mile to a mile – that it ends up covering the whole territory and leads to the downfall of the empire. It’s a story of absurdity and unintended consequences, surely two things leaders today can appreciate.

Reinvention and relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century instead draw on our ability to adjust our way of thinking, learning, doing and being. Leaders must get comfortable with living in a state of continually *becoming*, a perpetual beta mode. Leaders that stay on top of society’s changes do so by being receptive and able to learn. In a time where the half-life of any skill is about [five years](#), leaders bear a responsibility to renew their perspective in order to secure the relevance of their organizations.

As we attempt to transition into a networked creative economy, we need leaders who promote learning and who master fast, relevant, and autonomous learning themselves. There is no other way to address the wicked problems facing us. If work is learning and learning is the work, then leadership should be all about enabling learning. In a recent Deloitte study, [Global Human Capital Trends 2015](#), 85% of the respondents cited learning as being either important or very important. Yet, according to the study, more companies than ever report they are unprepared to address this challenge.

John Hagel, John Seely Brown, and Lang Davidson have described the shift toward [a massive transformation](#) from institutions designed for scalable efficiency to institutions designed for scalable learning. The key is to find ways to connect and participate in knowledge flows that challenge our thinking and allow us to discover new ways of connecting, collaborating and getting work done faster, smarter and better.

### **Personal Knowledge Mastery**

Sustainable competitive advantage depends on having people that know how to build relationships, seek information, make sense of observations and share ideas through an intelligent use of new technologies. To help leaders do that, we’ve developed a process we call Personal Knowledge Mastery (PKM), a lifelong learning strategy. It is a method for individuals to take control of their professional development through a continuous process of seeking, sensing-making, and sharing.

**Seek** is about finding things out and keeping up to date. In a world overflowing with information, we need smart filters to sort out the valuable information. It requires that we regularly evaluate and adjust the information sources that we base our thinking and decision making on. What matters

today is being connected to a wise network of trusted individuals who can help us filter useful information, expose blind spots and open our eyes.

**Sense** is how we personalize information and use it. Sensing includes reflection and putting into practice what we learn. It is a process based on critical thinking where we weave together our thoughts, experiences, impressions and feelings to make meaning of them. By writing a blog post or noting ideas down, we contextualize and reinforce our learning.

**Share** includes exchanging resources, ideas, and experiences with our networks as well as collaborating with our colleagues. Sharing is a contributing process where we pass our knowledge forward, work alongside others, go through iterations and collectively learn from important insights and reflections. We build respect and trust by being relevant when we share to our social networks, or speak in front of a crowd.

There is a wide range of digital tools out there for each of the PKM activities that can be fitted into a busy schedule and help people become self-directed, autonomous learners. Which tools to use depends largely on the context and personal preferences. Tools are important, but mastery in a digital age is only achieved if you know how to establish trust, respect, and relevance in human networks.

By seeking, sensing, and sharing, everyone in an organization can become part of a learning organism, listening at different frequencies, scanning the horizon, recognizing patterns and making better decisions on an informed basis. Just as Juan Manuel Fangio did it in the 1950 Monaco Grand Prix.

*This post is one in a series of perspectives by presenters and participants in the [7th Global Drucker Forum](#), taking place November 5-6, 2015 in Vienna. The theme: *Claiming Our Humanity – Managing in the Digital Age*.*

---

**Kenneth Mikkelsen** is a leadership advisor, learning designer, speaker and writer. He is Co-founder of FutureShifts and currently writing a book, *The Neo-Generalist*, about the way generalists shape our world with Richard Martin. Follow him on Twitter [@LeadershipABC](#).

---

**Harold Jarche** is an international consultant and speaker, helping people and businesses adapt to the network era. Harold provides pragmatic guidance on connected leadership, social learning, personal knowledge mastery, and workplace collaboration. Follow him on Twitter [@hjarche](#).

---