

Unlearn: Let Go of Past Success to Achieve Extraordinary Results

by Barry O'Reilly

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The underlying message of Barry O'Reilly's book "*Unlearn: Let Go of Past Success to Achieve Extraordinary Results*" is that great leaders must not only continuously learn new knowledge but also continuously unlearn obsolete knowledge. As the title suggests, unlearning is "the process of letting go of, moving away from, and reframing once-useful mindsets and acquired behaviors that were effective in the past, but now limit our success" (p. 3). Unlearning is crucial since it prevents us from being trapped in outdated thinking and practices that no longer work; O'Reilly's mission is to help readers understand what to unlearn, when and how. The focus of the book is the Cycle of Unlearning, which includes three steps: Unlearn, Relearn and Breakthrough (p. 17). The author asserts that this is a transformative system that empowers leaders and organizations to discover the recipe for greater, longer-lasting success.

The book consists of 12 chapters and an introduction which uses tennis superstar Serena Williams as an example illustrating the paradox of success. As O'Reilly relates, Serena Williams reached a point in her career when her once-successful strategies no longer delivered the same results as in the past. He explains how Serena got back on track and became the best tennis player in history, thus demonstrating why we need to unlearn (Chapter 1). Turning to the process of unlearning, O'Reilly introduces a three-step approach he calls the Cycle of Unlearning (Chapter 2) which can help turn the *obstacles to unlearning*, which conspire to keep us stuck in the status quo, into opportunities (Chapter 3). The necessary conditions for each step are further elaborated in the next three chapters (Chapters 4, 5 and 6) with relatable anecdotes and normative suggestions. The cycle can be initiated only if the leadership conditioning, i.e. the command-and-control approach that tells people what to do and how to do it, is unlearned. The author argues that the role of leadership is to "move decision-making authority and accountability to where the information is richest, and to the people closest to it" (p. 122), thus establishing the necessary conditions for people to unlearn (Chapter 7). An important source of information to trigger this cycle is external customers. Executives need to build a system to collect customer feedback that offers new insights into the limitations of the company's strategies, products and services. This is called *unlearning with customers* (Chapter 8). Another important source is internal and is related to deviant behaviors within the organization. If organizational practices that deviate from official norms have no adverse consequences in the short run, they tend to become normalized; this may eventually lead to catastrophic outcomes, as had



happened in NASA with the Columbia and Challenger space shuttle disasters. Normalized deviant behaviors must be unlearned through a joint effort of people within the organization (Chapter 9). This cannot be done unless proper incentives are in place to reinforce a culture of unlearning. Organizations should “unlearn the individual pay-for-performance incentives and relearn to create the conditions for authentic motivation, courageous behaviors, and exploring risky initiatives” (p. 171) enabling success at the system level (Chapter 10). Finally, O’Reilly tells the story of the NHS National Program for IT in the United Kingdom and explains how the Cycle of Unlearning transformed the most expensive software project failure in history into an extraordinary performance healthcare IT system (Chapter 11). In conclusion (Chapter 12), the author points out that the desired outcome of the Cycle of Unlearning is ultimately:

To shift how we think, perceive, and experience the world; to gather new information in new ways that are no longer constrained by our past successes; and to use that information to improve our decision making and actions (p. 203).

Unlearning is more difficult than learning since it is not easy to break old habits, let alone realize that the old habits do more harm than good. In this sense, the book does an important job in making the concept of unlearning easier to understand and practice.

The key ideas of the book, in my point of view, can be summarized in three points: why unlearn, how to unlearn and when to unlearn. First, why unlearn? As the pace of innovation keeps increasing, once-useful knowledge becomes obsolete more and more rapidly, necessitating systematic unlearning. New understanding will fail to materialize as long as misleading knowledge and wrong assumptions are still in place. Second, how to unlearn? The Cycle of Unlearning comprises three steps:

- (1) Unlearning, the first step, involves analyzing why things are not working out as expected and clarifying what you wish to achieve, to be aware of how “your own beliefs, mindsets, or behaviors are limiting your potential and current performance” and to accept that “you must consciously move away from them” (p. 19).
- (2) Relearning, the second step, involves creating space for experimentation, then testing out new behaviors and applying new information.
- (3) The third step, “breaking through” means achieving new success by reflecting on the experimental results, making course corrections, and using new learning to go through the loop again.

Third, when to unlearn? The Cycle of Unlearning can be applied in specific situations, such as when trying out everything to resolve a challenge, or when new information triggers a new understanding of the world, but the ideal approach is to apply it regularly and continuously. I agree with the author’s view that unlearning is not simply forgetting knowledge; it is a conscious act of discarding incorrect knowledge. I also believe that unlearning should not be a once-and-done event but a system of repeated steps to continuously achieve new breakthroughs. This is relevant not only for sports, individual development, organizational practices and leadership, as mentioned in the book, but also for a wide range of other applications, e.g. in psychology, psychotherapy or history. Thus, the book is a good fit for this special issue which explores interdisciplinary perspectives on unlearning.

One aspect of the book that intrigues me is the discussion of how unlearning can be related to the concept of *The Learning Organization*. The concept of *The Learning Organization* entered the mainstream with Senge’s (1990) book “The Fifth Discipline.” A true learning organization, according to O’Reilly, uses “a systematic approach to taking in information from all sources of [the] organization, synthesizing, leveraging, and then using it

as the basis upon which to innovate”, to “actively create opportunities and safe environments for people to learn by doing through experience, informal settings, simulations, and play” (p. 163). This formula incorporates unlearning as an important element. A learning organization must routinely unlearn old behaviors that no longer work and replace them with new behaviors (i.e. relearn) so as to achieve success, mirroring O’Reilly’s Cycle of Unlearning. The term “the unlearning organization” is mentioned in the book (p. 196), reminding me of the concept of the “radical unlearning organization” (Hsu, 2013), i.e. an organization that aims to establish a mechanism for its members to learn and unlearn institutionalized knowledge (Nguyen, 2017). If learning and unlearning are given equal status – as opposed to subsuming unlearning under learning – it makes sense to build a “learning and unlearning organization” (Morais-Storz and Nguyen, 2017) in which, conditions are established for employees to recognize and challenge an outdated status quo, understand what needs to be unlearned and experiment with new practices so that the organization can reach its full potential for creativity and innovation. Because of the uncertainty of these processes, such an organization can only exist if employees and teams are provided with a degree of psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999) so that they are unafraid of failing in front of others.

All in all the book is pleasant to read, and I would recommend it for practitioners at every organizational level. Leaders, managers, entrepreneurs, MBA students and others can use this book to reflect on themselves and their situation and gain insights into how they can continuously improve their performance. The book is also helpful for scholars who teach subjects related to innovation, organization and management, psychology, etc., since it offers many real-world examples of how unlearning can be implemented and what its outcomes may be. It is a timely publication, being the first popular management book to focus on unlearning, a concept that is important to grasp but difficult to master. My take-away from the book is the mantra for practicing unlearning: think big, but start small, and then scale up.

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Further reading

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About the author

Nhien Nguyen is an Associate Professor at NTNU, Faculty of Economics and Management, and Department of Industrial Economics and Technology Management, Trondheim, Norway. She is also a Senior Researcher at Nordland Research Institute, Bodø, Norway, and Associate Editor of The Learning Organization journal (Emerald). She holds a PhD in Innovation Management and Strategy from NTNU. She is a member of the Norwegian Research School in Innovation (NORSI), a visiting fellow at Stanford University (SCANCOR program), MIT Sloan School of Management (MBA program) and cross-registrant at Harvard Business School (MBA program). Nhien Nguyen has been leading and coordinating several research projects focusing on innovation strategies, both at the organizational level and the national/regional policy level. She is the scientific leader of the SeeRRI project (H2020 – SWAFS14- 2018) which aims to establish a foundation for building self-sustaining research and innovation ecosystems in Europe through Responsible Research and Innovation (RRI). She is also involved in the *I AM RRI* project (H2020-SWAFS12-2017) as the work package leader for developing the model of innovation value chains in Additive Manufacturing under the consideration of the RRI.

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