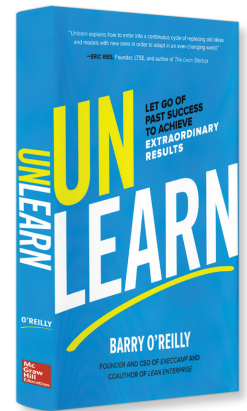


Unlearn

Let Go of Past Success to Achieve Extraordinary Results

by **Barry O'Reilly**



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THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

There's a learning curve to running any successful business. But once you begin to rely on past achievements or get stuck in outdated thinking and practices that no longer work, you need to take a step back — and unlearn.

In *Unlearn*, Barry O'Reilly shows you how to break the cycle of behaviors that were effective in the past but are no longer relevant in the current business climate and now limit or may even stand in the way of your success.

This unique resource walks you through every step of the unlearning process. You'll discover new ways of thinking and leading in every industry. By intentionally and routinely applying the system of unlearning, you'll be able to adapt your mindset, adopt new behaviors, acquire new skills and explore new options that will totally transform your performance and the business you lead.

Good leaders know they need to continuously learn. But great leaders know when to unlearn the past to succeed in the future. *Unlearn* shows you the way.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- To unlearn the behaviors and mindsets that prevent you and your businesses from moving forward.
- To relearn new skills, strategies and innovations that are transforming the world.
- To break through and discover new information and insights that guide your behavior, perspective and mindset.

Why Unlearn?

There comes a time in the life of every individual when doing the things that brought you success in the past no longer delivers the same results. You wake up, walk into your office and sit at your desk just as you always have. But suddenly you're stuck, stagnating, unsatisfied or struggling with what was once your secret to success.

This is the paradox of success. While thinking and doing certain methods may have brought you success in the past, it's almost certain they won't continue to bring you success in the future.

Disruption does not actually apply to organizations. The truth is it applies to *individuals*. Exceptional leaders have discovered it's not how smart they are, how much they know, how long they've been in an industry or what they have learned. It's the ability to recognize when to unlearn and when to let go of past success and their outdated thinking and behaviors, and innovate new mindsets and methods to achieve extraordinary results.

In times past, an individual's knowledge would last a lifetime. Indeed, knowledge would be passed down for many generations and still be highly useful. Yet, as the pace of innovation increases, once-useful knowledge now becomes rapidly obsolete.

The answer is not only to learn. We struggle even more to know what to let go of, move away from and *unlearn*.

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. It's not forgetting or discarding knowledge or experience; it's the conscious act of letting go of outdated information and actively gathering and taking in new information to inform effective decision making and action.

Consider what great leaders and the great companies they lead have in common. They have cultivated a capability within themselves to innovate, adapt and anticipate the future. They invest in experiences that enable them to grow; they seek situations that are uncomfortable, uncertain and the results unknown. They create mechanisms to experiment quickly and safely gather new information to evolve into something better.

They succeed over the long term by not holding on to what once brought them success. How they succeed isn't magical; it's methodical. It's not down to serendipity or luck — they have intentional systems.

How to Unlearn

Accordingly, unlearning isn't a one-and-done event — it's a *system*: a system of letting go and adapting to the situational reality of the present as we look to the future. It's recognizing that whatever it is that we have previously done may no longer be useful at this moment. Your mission is to develop the capability to know when to move away from outdated information, take in new information to inform your thinking, and adapt your behaviors as a result.

The Cycle of Unlearning

The system of unlearning is based on a three-step approach to individual and collective growth called the Cycle of Unlearning. Adopting the Cycle of Unlearning doesn't rely on being smart, or lucky, or desperate or all of the above. It relies only on you — your courage and commitment to use it intentionally in your work and your life to achieve extraordinary results.

Step one: Unlearn. Unlearning does not lead with words; it leads with action. You can't just say, "Yeah, of course I want to unlearn." You must first embrace your purpose by clarifying your why and your what. Why exactly do you want to unlearn? What specifically do you want to unlearn?

Do you believe this is important? Are you open to it? Are you curious? Do you agree there could be a better answer other than your own, an alternative way to achieve better results? When you can answer "yes" to these questions, then it's time to focus on the specifics of what you want to unlearn.

Step two: Relearn. There are immense challenges to relearning effectively, and we create many of these challenges ourselves. First, you must be willing to adapt and be open to information that goes against your inherent beliefs — that may be at odds with what you have always been told or taught to do. Second, you may need to learn how to learn again. Finally, you must create an environment for relearning to happen in a meaningful, yet often challenging, space outside your comfort zone.

Step three: Breakthrough. Once you learn how to relearn and open yourself up to new information flows, networks and systems from every possible source, you are poised to develop the kind of breakthrough thinking that has the potential to vault you into the lead. Breakthrough is the result of unlearning and then relearning — it's the new information and insights that come out of the first two steps of the Cycle of Unlearning. The information and insights

You don't trigger a shift in mindset by simply thinking differently; you start by acting differently.

are extremely powerful because they inform and guide your behaviors, perspective and mindset.

Unlearning the Obstacles to Unlearning

Often the most challenging obstacle to unlearning is ourselves: our old thought patterns that make us blind to new possibilities and new ways of improving. Obstacles may be internal, external or contextual, but whatever their origin, they conspire to keep us firmly stuck in the status quo. They include

- Our leadership conditioning;
- Our knowledge threshold;
- Our biases;
- Our desire to always be correct;
- Our focus on reward and recognition;
- Our ability (or inability) to deal with uncertainty and risk;
- Our curiosity (or lack thereof);
- Our environment.

The way we view success can be an obstacle in itself because success can limit our willingness and curiosity to unlearn. The more successful people are, the more fearful they become to try untested methods or alternative techniques because they're afraid their stellar record, prestige or personal brand will be destroyed.

Turning Obstacles into Opportunity

When Andy Grove was at the helm of Intel, he realized that the business they were in at the time — memory chips, which were becoming commodities — was going to die. Grove recognized that Intel was experiencing an existential threat, and he pivoted the company to the production of microprocessors, a category that Intel stole from its Japanese competitors (which had 60 percent market share) and eventually came to dominate.

Said Grove about the decision: "I looked out the window at the Ferris wheel of the Great America amusement park revolving in the distance, then I turned back to Gordon [co-founder of Intel] and I asked, 'If we got kicked out and the board brought in a new CEO, what do you think he would do?' Gordon answered without hesitation, 'He would get us out of memories.' I stared at him, numb, then said, 'Why shouldn't you and I walk out the door, come back in and do it ourselves?'"

And that's exactly what they did. The best leaders don't have all the answers; they ask better questions. The result of better questions — or unlearning prompts — is better answers.

Andy Grove and other successful leaders have realized that if they wanted to have a breakthrough in leadership mindset and business results, *they* had to behave differently, not their teams, and they had to commit to it.

You don't trigger a shift in mindset by simply thinking differently; you start by acting differently. When you act differently, you start to see and experience the world differently, impacting your mindset as a result. Behaving in new ways changes your perspective on situations, which in turn impacts your mindset. The resulting shift in mindset then affects your behavior, and so a virtuous cycle of new thinking and behavior begins.

Unlearn

We can unlearn the old patterns and practices that continue to hold us back by addressing a series of specific necessary conditions. Resolving each one of these necessary conditions represents a step through the Cycle of Unlearning and closer to our final destination: breakthrough.

Necessary condition one: Identify a challenge you wish to address. Ultimately, unlearning depends on you selecting a challenge — an obstacle to remove or opportunity to enhance — that will have a positive effect on your performance.

The very first step in unlearning, therefore, is to decide exactly what it is that you will focus your efforts on. Perhaps

you've got a long-time product that isn't performing as well as it used to, or your own efforts at personal development aren't bringing the results that you hoped for, or maybe you or your team seems to be stuck in a rut you can't get out of.

Necessary condition two: Define success as though you have dissolved or conquered the challenge. The key to any good experiment is to define success before you start. The same is true of unlearning. But people often struggle to define good aspirations or outcomes. In that case, it's helpful for people to tell stories of what success might look like if they solved the challenge they decided to tackle. What would they be doing? What might be happening to them, the people they work with and their customers? How would it be different from today? Visualize or tell the story of what it would look like six months, a year, or three years after they solved that challenge.

What are the behaviors you, your team or your customers would be exhibiting to confirm that you had addressed that challenge and not only solved it but dissolved it forever? What would be faster, cheaper or better quality? Write it down. Doing this will help you start to get a picture of where you want to be, what you may need to get you there and any concerns that might be holding you back. But the most important part of the exercise is to **THINK BIG!** It's your aspiration or outcome to own, so be audacious with the extraordinary results you will achieve.

Necessary condition three: Channel courage over seeking comfort. Seeking comfort over channeling courage often results in taking the easy option of avoiding situations where you feel you're not in control of the outcome. As a result, you're stuck in the status quo and not growing.

Voluntarily moving outside your comfort zone requires courage. It requires a willingness to be vulnerable. In her book *Rising Strong*, Brené Brown says, "If we are brave enough often enough, we will fall; this is the physics of vulnerability. When we commit to showing up and risking falling, we are actually committing to falling. Daring is not saying, 'I'm willing to risk failure.' Daring is saying, 'I know I will eventually fail and I'm still all in.' Fortune may favor the bold, but so does failure."

Brown's concept of vulnerability illuminates perfectly what is required to unlearn — being willing to put yourself out there, to really go outside your comfort zone and to be courageous rather than to be comfortable.

Necessary condition four: Commit to, start and scale the cycle of unlearning. The critical next step is to make a very firm commitment to moving forward through the Cycle of Unlearning and then doing just that. But this is not a one-and-done cycle; it is a scalable system that allows you to tackle bigger, more ambitious and more audacious challenges as you iterate more quickly and frequently the Cycle of Unlearning. Each iteration builds upon the previous one as you build your courage, curiosity and capabilities to strive for excellence in whatever it is you wish to achieve.

Relearn

How do you start to relearn? It's simpler than you may believe. You think big about that aspiration or outcome you want to accomplish. Next, you start small by doing something that's really easy to do. This approach enables people to get started easily and feel successful quickly. When paired with deliberate practice, this helps build confidence and gain momentum to take on greater, even more difficult challenges over time.

Relearning is a process of experimentation to try new behaviors and take in new data, new information and new perspectives. By considering all this new input, we challenge our existing mental models of the world and adapt our thinking and behavior to achieve extraordinary results. Here are the three necessary conditions of relearning:

Necessary condition one: You've thought big; now create options for small steps. After you have clarified your desired outcome, you then brainstorm options for small steps that will take you toward your desired outcome. List them all. Challenge yourself to create as much optionality for yourself as possible. List new and old behaviors and those in which you have skills, are a novice or are simply curious to experiment with. The more options you put down, the more likely you are to find the behavior that will work for you.

Now that you have created a number of options, identify the first small step you believe is aligned to achieving that high-level outcome you desire. Take that small step and celebrate the results, regardless of whether they are positive or negative.

Necessary condition two: Find the right behavior that aligns with helping you achieve the outcome you want. Behavior scientist B.J. Fogg describes something

called behavior matching. The purpose of behavior matching is to find the right behavior that aligns to your level of motivation and ability as you aim to achieve the aspiration or outcome you desire.

Behavior matching often requires iteration and alignment to individual competencies, skills and preferences. It's another reason why you need to experiment with many behaviors, because you may need to try various options to find the right behavior for yourself. Doing smaller, faster, cheaper iterations on different behaviors will help people find the one that works best for them more quickly. It's also easier to recover from unwanted results, fail gracefully, discover that it wasn't the right behavior and move forward.

Necessary condition three: Starting small is even smaller than you think. People often leap to the big single-step solution and deconstruct it into a series of tasks to complete. They don't scale back to small steps to experiment with and grow into. They define success as completing all their predefined tasks, not cultivating new behaviors by taking small steps and course correcting as they progress.

Ticking off tasks for big-bang solutions will not help you relearn; that should be unlearned. What are the smallest steps that will keep you moving toward your desired aspiration or outcome and, ultimately, to accomplishing it? Make a list, and then make these steps even smaller. Ask yourself, "What could I do in a month? What could I do in a week? What could I do in a day? What's my smallest step?"

Write them down, quantify and constrain them. Then get ready to get started.

Breakthrough

As we have seen, each of the three steps in the Cycle of Unlearning can be broken down into a series of specific necessary conditions for action. In the case of breakthrough, there are four necessary conditions:

Necessary condition one: Reflect. You don't break through to transform yourself, your teams or your organization by simply ticking boxes as you complete your task list. You break through by stepping back and reflecting on exactly what it is you are doing and the results your effort is yielding. Are you doing the right things? Should you be doing something different? Are you actually achieving the aspiration or outcomes you intended? Or are you simply ticking off tasks on a list, and asking if it took as much effort or time as you thought?

Necessary condition two: Feed forward. As you gather feedback from your small experiments, feed the results forward into your next small experiment, and then feed those results forward into your next small experiment — the benefits become exponential. The quality of each subsequent experiment increases because you will tend to apply and compound the lessons learned from previous experiments.

Measure your outcomes over output. Strive to gather feedback in real time to discover rapidly how your efforts have been received, thus optimizing your adaptations and next actions in minutes, hours and days rather than weeks, months and years as might be the case with traditional approaches.

What are the smallest steps that will keep you moving toward your desired aspiration or outcome?

Necessary condition three: Align impact and increase safety to scale breakthroughs. How do we start to scale the Cycle of Unlearning and the breakthroughs that result? The key is deliberate practice, which demands explicit focus, reflection, and taking on more challenging tasks to keep improving and progressing toward extraordinary results.

Note that scaling breakthroughs is not about copying the same practices that one individual or organization did to achieve their breakthrough. You scale breakthroughs when you encourage people to share lessons from what they've done to improve, the successes that they've had and the setbacks they've endured. That normalizes the behavior of getting uncomfortable, being courageous and embracing uncertainty about how you will try to grow and improve in your own context.

Necessary condition four: Increase your rate of unlearning. Pairing experimentation with deliberate practice enables you to respond to a rapidly changing world. Thomas Edison understood the power of unlearning,

relearning and breakthroughs at his Menlo Park complex, which was known at the time as the “Invention Factory.”

Edison and his team optimized for the number of experiments they ran, rather than how long they worked. In many ways, Edison’s operation looked a lot like today’s Silicon Valley tech firms. There was no such thing as a 9-to-5 schedule — workers labored through the night if necessary and slept the next day. Everything was in beta and subject to constant experimentation until they achieved the outcomes they desired and the breakthroughs they sought. Consequently, new products were born.

Great leaders get better answers because they ask better questions. And they ask them in ways that increases the rate at which they unlearn, relearn and break through — both for themselves and for others with whom they work and do business.

Unlearning Management

CEOs, executives and managers who hold onto legacy thinking and outmoded methods such as command and control — telling people what to do and exactly how to do it — are not only micromanaging through control systems designed by themselves and for themselves, they are also limiting the potential of the entire organization.

This kills innovation and strips all human creativity, ingenuity and expression from others’ work. Followers gradually become robots simply focused on executing work — not thinking, not questioning, not believing they have any control over what they do.

Leaders can actually gain more control by taking their hands off the wheel and allowing those employees closest to the situation to make decisions at speed and take accountability for the results.

But first, executives and managers must unlearn much of their leadership conditioning, which today is still based on an Industrial Era that has long passed. Instead, they must provide clarity of purpose, intent and direction for what is needed and why it matters, and then stop, shut up and listen. Let people in the organization with the most context and knowledge of their domains figure out how to get there.

The job of leaders is to design systems that enable people to experiment with potential options and learn as quickly, as cheaply and as safely as possible while they discover

how to achieve the desired outcomes. These are outcomes that leaders and their teams agree upon together, a shared understanding of what accountability means.

Relearn to Trust Your People

Leaders don’t just randomly trust their people. Individuals and organizations create systems that give them trust or fast feedback if the aspiration or outcome they wish to achieve is not possible, flawed or must be corrected — thus providing control.

Toyota has long believed that first-line employees can be more than cogs in a soulless manufacturing machine; they can be problem solvers, innovators and change agents.

Toyota pioneered the use of Andon cords strung above the assembly lines in their manufacturing plants; now wireless yellow call buttons serve the same purpose. When there is a serious problem that can’t be quickly and easily resolved, assembly line workers have the authority to push the yellow call button, which immediately stops the assembly line of the entire factory and illuminates a sign above the workstation, which indicates exactly where the problem is.

When an employee pushes the button, the first thing the manager does is “go and see” the problem immediately by stopping whatever he or she is doing and physically walking over to the workstation in question. The managers thank employees for finding the problems and then ask the workers a series of five questions to aid the employees in problem solving to address the obstacle they have discovered. In his book *Toyota Kata*, Mike Rother describes this as the Coaching Kata:

- What is the target condition?
- What is the actual condition now?
- What obstacles do you think are preventing you from reaching the target condition? Which one are you addressing now?
- What is your next step (next experiment)? What do you expect?
- When can we go and see what we have learned from taking that step?

The managers don’t tell the employees how to fix the problem, or correct it for them. Instead, they work together to devise an experiment that improves the system of work.

When you have decisions that are highly uncertain, make feedback loops shorter and faster, gather information, adjust

Feedback is most effective when it comes from reality, and the reality provided by our customers far exceeds the opinion of any internal authority figure.

and go again. Fundamentally, it comes down to unlearning your legacy leadership conditioning and relearning the better behaviors that will make you a better leader and make your people better leaders, too. The breakthrough occurs when you've got all your people leading and they're scaling the leadership in your organization.

Unlearning with Customers

For the majority of companies, engaging customers and obtaining their feedback comprises the last step in the product journey. After we have spent significant time and money designing, building and launching new products, services or processes for our customers, it's often only then that we ask them what they think. Unfortunately, this is absolutely the worst moment to first hear what our customers have to say — it's far too late.

We must unlearn the way we engage, collaborate and create with our customers, and relearn how to interact, leverage and connect with them to discover new innovations and breakthroughs together.

T-Mobile CEO John Legere understands this better than most leaders. When Legere first joined the company in 2012, he didn't sit in his office and consume endless presentations made by employees, market analysts and researchers. Instead, he had a special phone line installed in his office to listen directly to customer service calls for three hours a day and better understand what obstacles, issues and challenges customers were facing while trying to use T-Mobile's services.

In this way, he created an unfiltered and unsanitized firehose of customer feedback to inform what both he and T-Mobile needed to unlearn and relearn in order to improve their customers' experience and innovate T-Mobile's products and services.

Feedback is most effective when it comes from reality, and the reality provided by our customers far exceeds the opinion of any internal authority figure. Therefore, how

we gather information — especially from our customers through their experience of the product and services we create — becomes the key input for our Cycle of Unlearning, to understand what works and what does not.

Building Your System To Unlearn with Customers

When it comes to creating a system to unlearn with customers, these are some of the key questions for leaders to work through:

- How am I making decisions?
- Where am I getting that information?
- What's the quality of the information that I get?
- How frequently and quickly can I get it? How frequently and quickly can I respond to it?
- How is that information helping me to unlearn what's not working with the products I'm building or the way my company is working?
- How can I use that information to relearn how we serve our customers?

Unlearning Incentives

One of the reasons people get trapped doing the same things they've always done is because of organizational incentives that drive their behaviors. These incentives are often financial in nature, including pay raises and bonuses.

If you create a contingent relationship with your employees based on rewards by saying, "If you do this, you will get that," then they will have a natural tendency to focus on the "get that" part of the equation.

If, for example, you tell managers that they will get a bonus for reducing operating costs, then the managers will put their full focus on taking costs out of the system, perhaps even to the detriment of the overall organization and its long-term growth prospects. And as the magnitude of the "get that" increases — as bonuses rise into the tens and

hundreds of thousands of dollars — then executives and other employees will do whatever it takes to earn them.

It's time to unlearn individual pay-for-performance incentives and relearn to create the conditions for authentic motivation, courageous behaviors, and exploring risky initiatives in a controlled manner to get the breakthroughs to achieve extraordinary results. The strategy is that you don't suddenly change everything you're doing and work in a new way. Think big, but start small. Pick one or two initiatives in your portfolio that you can experiment with in a safe-to-fail manner.

Incentives by Design

Employees want to be appreciated, and companies actually have many instruments to make people feel appreciated and motivate them in their work, beginning with job design.

3M famously encouraged its technical employees to spend 15 percent of their time pursuing their own ideas, a remarkably progressive program that started in 1947. This practice resulted in a variety of product innovations for the company, including Post-it® Notes.

Companies can provide career advancement opportunities, allow employees to work from home, offer open time off and much more. When incentives are done right, people feel appreciated and engaged in their work. When done wrong, employees put in the minimum amount of effort to get the most out of the incentive system. This only leads to negative outcomes for all parties.

When designing incentives, remember Charlie Munger's words: "You get what you reward for." Identify your desired

system-level outcomes, then make visible and clearly signal to employees what behavior you are looking for.

The Cycle of Unlearning begins with you. Think about what you want to unlearn for yourself, and commit to start. There is no ideal state or moment or situation, and waiting for existential threats or crises is not fun. Instead, adopt the practice of unlearning intentionally and habitually as we do breathing and living.

With ongoing, deliberate practice, every one of us can leverage unlearning instinctively and use it intentionally — not just when there is no other alternative or option.

This unique capability is what enables leaders to continually find new and higher levels of performance — often beyond what they initially thought possible — within themselves, their teams and their organizations.

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Barry O'Reilly is a business advisor, entrepreneur and author who has pioneered the intersection of business model innovation, product development, organizational design and culture transformation. He works with business leaders and teams from global organizations that seek to invent the future, not fear it. He is the co-author of international best-seller *Lean Enterprise: How High Performance Organizations Innovate at Scale*.

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