

The Camel's Footprints

It is 2 a.m. and I am deep in the South Sinai desert. I negotiated a price with the Bedouin camel master, then climbed onto the animal that would help me reach the summit of the place the locals call Moses Mountain. A sacred place for Muslims, Jews, and Christians, Moses Mountain - otherwise known as Mount Sinai - rises 7,500 feet above the desert floor. Pilgrims have been making this ascent since 200 A.D.

There is barely a sliver of moon in the night sky, so the trail melts into darkness 20 feet in front of me. After a few weeks immersed in the chaos and bustle of other parts of Egypt, I relish the quiet. All I hear is the slow, rhythmic crunch of gravel as my camel meanders up the mountain trail, punctuated by the occasional Arabic directive given by Solomon, his owner.

Thirty minutes into the journey the flat, broad path turns steep, rocky, and narrow. As I pay more attention to my surroundings, I realize that Solomon is nowhere to be found. Eventually I hear his voice in the distance; he is tending other camels. I am alone.

My camel seems secure in his sense of direction as he navigates the mountain trail, though I'm not so sure as I feel my stomach in my throat whenever his hooves land inches from the unguarded edge of the ancient trail. Ignoring his apprehensive cargo, he continues with methodical, sure-footed confidence.

Upon our arrival, I asked Solomon how my camel learned to navigate the ascent. In a word, his answer was "practice." During the past 11 years, they made thousands of trips up and down the trail. At first, Solomon's camel simply tagged along with more seasoned camels. This was followed by repeated cycles of practice, with plenty of feedback from Solomon.

With each round of practice and feedback, the camel would make refinements to his approach and try again. Eventually, the ability to navigate this dangerous trail in the dark became as natural as a walk in the park, and the camel could complete the ascent on his own.

I smiled to myself when I realized that this desert wisdom is the same process that helps us turn good ideas and hopeful intentions into changed behavior and better outcomes. A "learning practice" is a proven approach for converting goals and aspirations into real results.

By learning practice I mean starting a regular routine of rehearsing the new behavior or action, reflecting on how it is working (or getting feedback from others), making refinements so that it works a little better next time, then repeating the process over and over until you consistently get the results you want.

A learning practice is never a quick fix; rather, it is a long-term commitment. It simply takes time to really change. Since you've likely been practicing the less effective way for many years, it takes more than a few rounds of a learning practice to replace old habits with better ones.

It may take hundreds of rounds of practice for you to become the leader you aspire to be, though it is well worth the effort. After all, if a camel can do it, so can you.

Here are some questions to help you determine whether a learning practice can serve you:

1. What good ideas and hopeful intentions have been lingering in your mind?
2. Which ones would have the greatest impact on your ability to get the results you want?
3. What could you imagine accomplishing if the new behavior and action were available to you?
4. Is the effort required worth it to you? Why?
5. What could you begin practicing now that would help you make progress toward your goals?