

Learning the Acton Way

Introduction

You are among the best and the brightest. From kindergarten through college you have learned to absorb what the teacher told you and to regurgitate it back. As a reward, you received high grades and praise. Much of your ego is invested in being right. Because of this, you will find learning the Acton Way very frustrating.

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand. Could you repeat that again real slow?” Lewis asked.

It was early in the semester. I was a relatively inexperienced case teacher. Moments before, a particularly bright MBA student had managed to string together an amazing stream of buzzwords like “sustainable competitive advantage” and “core competency”—saying little of substance but sounding impressive. In the front row, Lewis raised his hand and asked the question above, stumbling over the words in his strong East Texas accent.

Students began to nudge each other. It was clear that Lewis just didn’t “get it.” I knew Lewis’s father, a prominent Texas businessman. I was pondering how I would explain to him that Lewis had failed the class.

Lewis, oblivious of my concerns, kept asking questions day after day. By the third week of class, something miraculous happened. The “smart” students now lived in fear that Lewis would explore their shallow arguments by asking his simple but powerful questions.

This note is about learning the Acton Way, a Socratic and experiential approach to preparing you for a long and meaningful life in business. You will learn the same lesson that I learned from Lewis: questions are more important than answers and lead to clearer thinking, and clearer thinking leads to better decisions.

It will be a frustrating experience for those of you who, like me, enjoy being experts. When in doubt, just repeat to yourself, “It’s asking the right question that matters, not sounding smart.” Eventually, you may even come to believe this.

The Acton Approach to Learning

At Acton, learning is not a series of tests to be passed, but rather the start of a lifelong journey. Learning at Acton starts with humble curiosity reinforced by crisp logic. This leads to decisions, experimentation, mistakes, and better decisions. Eventually this way

of learning becomes a deep-seated habit that will help form your character and lead you to your destiny.

The key principles of the Acton Way:

- Clear thoughts lead to deliberate actions
- Deliberate actions lead to good habits
- Good habits lead to a strong character
- A strong character leads to a worthy calling
- A worthy calling leads to your destiny¹

Clear Thoughts and Asking the Right Questions

Many entrepreneurs are so addicted to “doing” that their execution pattern is “ready, fire, aim.”

Doing *is* important. Entrepreneurs get things done. But getting the *right* thing done is more important than frantic action.

Clear thoughts begin with humble questions. All of us think we know more than we do, and most of us hate to look inept or foolish. As a result, we are afraid to ask the most basic questions.

Socrates knew that he knew nothing. However, he craved knowledge and went searching for the wisest person on earth. Time after time he was disappointed, finding “experts” who knew little but thought they were wise. It eventually dawned on Socrates that *he* was the wisest person on earth because at least he knew that he knew nothing.

The first step to thinking clear thoughts is to follow Socrates. Assume that you know nothing. When someone uses an unfamiliar word, make sure to ask, “What exactly do you mean by that?” Press. Like Lewis, you’ll be surprised to find that many people use jargon to disguise how little they know or to avoid taking a clear stand in order to escape from making a decision.

Some Advice on Thinking Clearly

Before you start an analysis, ask, “What is my objective?” You cannot think clearly if you do not understand the task at hand.

Before making a decision, gather more information. Question the accuracy of the data. Is the person providing the data telling you the truth? What is in it for them?

¹ From Os Guinness in *The Calling*.

Dig below the surface. When faced with a series of examples, ask, “How are these examples alike? How are they different?” Forcing yourself to be specific about similarities and differences can reveal unseen complexities in a situation, allowing even more powerful patterns to emerge.

Use priorities and sequencing to clarify issues: What is the most important task? The second most important? What task is the most urgent?

Make sure your thoughts are logical and supported by evidence. “I would move forward because . . .” “The most valuable step of the manufacturing process is . . . because . . .” An emphatic statement that lacks the word “because” or is not followed by evidence or numerical proof is often no more than an opinion.

From Clear Thinking to Deliberate Actions

In the world of entrepreneurship, thoughts must lead to action in order to have value for your customers, your shareholders, and yourself.

People who think clearly tend to act decisively and people who act decisively become leaders. When you think clearly, you carefully weigh alternatives and search for evidence. Forceful decisions and crisp execution follow.

Decisions supported by evidence are persuasive as well as easy to reverse if the situation changes. In contrast, emotional decisions blind the decision maker to new information.

Deliberate Actions Lead to Good Habits

Master entrepreneurs have learned from experience to quickly assess a situation and ask the right questions. Intuitively, they string together questions into logical sequences that lead to new insights.

As an Acton student, you will face over 300 real-world case dilemmas in less than one year. Frameworks, such as the FIT framework, will teach you a logical sequence for addressing the most important questions and determining which follow-up questions are pertinent. Before long, asking the right questions, in the right order, will become a habit that teases out patterns, which in turn can lead to better decisions.

The ability to recognize patterns—intuition—cannot be developed from lectures or absorbed from a book. You can only obtain it from real-world experience or from the much less expensive lessons in a case classroom.

Good Habits Lead to a Strong Character

The Greek root of the word “character” means “to etch.”² Character is built from the lines that habit etches on your soul.

If you make decisions with intention, clarity, and courage, it is like choosing to minimize the character lines that you do not like and etching more deeply those that show the real you. If you consistently make decisions from a long-term perspective, your character lines will deepen, and this will help make the most difficult choices clearer.

If leading a long and meaningful life is important to you, long-term consequences must override short-term expediency. Part of thinking clearly involves asking, “What’s my objective *for the long run*?”

One of the worst things that can happen for those who seek fame and fortune is to have early financial success. At that point, arrogance sets in—a hunger for the reinforcement of short-term gains until the bottom line is all that matters. Shortcuts become the norm rather than the exception.

At Acton, we want you to learn to make decisions with the long-term consequences in mind. We want you to choose a time-tested ethical framework and measure your decisions against what you say you hold dear.³

From a Strong Character to a Worthy Calling

Most entrepreneurs who look back on a life well-lived will tell you that only two questions matter: “Was I a good person?” and “Did I contribute something meaningful?” Entrepreneurs who found a calling are more likely to answer yes to both questions.

A calling is the purpose for which you are on this earth. It is the place where your innate gifts, most intense desires, and a burning need in the world intersect. Finding your calling does not mean that struggles and annoyances will disappear; only that a higher purpose will render these obstacles insignificant.

Finding a calling worthy of your talents requires you to understand yourself—to look at your gifts, to look deeply inside yourself for blind spots, to examine the etchings that are your character, both the attractive and unattractive parts—and to see how these can help you find a way to contribute meaningfully to others.

² From Os Guinness in *The Calling*.

³ In our Life of Meaning course, Acton students learn how to recognize and apply ethical frameworks including Utilitarian; Fairness-Justice; Virtue-Based Ethics; and frameworks based on religious tradition.

A Worthy Calling Leads to Destiny

Many people think that technological breakthroughs, crisp execution, and competitive advantage are the keys to building a business that will succeed in the long run. Rigorous research, however, shows that “getting the right people on the bus” and “character” are far more important than tactics or strategy.⁴

Luck will come and go. Trends will rise and fall. New technologies will bloom and fade. But none of these will determine your destiny or the destiny of your company. Who you are will determine your destiny.

Summary: Back to the Beginning

Acton’s approach to learning is a far cry from the traditional model, in which teachers talk and students parrot. Remember:

- Clear thoughts lead to deliberate actions
- Deliberate actions lead to good habits
- Good habits lead to a strong character
- A strong character leads to a worthy calling
- A worthy calling leads to your destiny

Learning the Acton Way is a lifelong journey, an exploration in which the entrepreneur-teacher is a guide and role model, someone who is asking the same questions, only with more experience, perspective, and understanding.

Learning is a matter of thoughtful trial and error, a product of examined conversations and careful experimentation. The burden to learn is on you. Small mistakes teach you what to avoid; well-crafted decisions, practice, and consistency show you the way to good habits. Good habits form who you are, and who you are dictates your destiny.

We wish you the best as you work these first few weeks on clear thinking and crisp decision-making.

⁴ From Jim Collins in *Good to Great*.