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# PROFIT FROM EXPERIENCE

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Dr. Michael J. O'Brien

# PROFIT FROM EXPERIENCE

*A Guide to Knowing Yourself  
and Influencing Others*

Michael J. O'Brien  
*with* Larry Shook

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*To Beverly,  
with love,  
for your continual support,  
constant encouragement,  
and frequent inspiration.*

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# Getting Ready to Grow

*“The future of work  
consists of learning a living.”*

—MARSHALL MCLuhan

**P**ROFIT FROM EXPERIENCE is based on two assumptions. First, we live in an age when dramatic personal change is required of all of us. Second, systematically learning from experience is the best means at our disposal for changing in the ways we need to.

The problem is (and we have to say this, because the evidence is overwhelming) that learning from experience is not automatic, either for individuals or for society. It is all too natural for people and organizations, or even civilizations, to make the same mistakes over and over again.

What happens consistently is that people don't notice when change is required. To actually learn something new from experience requires an intentional and disciplined effort.

## Why You Should Read This Book

*PROFIT FROM EXPERIENCE* is offered as a handbook, and a field book, of personal change. Because the world around us is changing so profoundly, the least adaptive among us are being ruthlessly weeded out—professionally, emotionally, and even

physically. To be able to learn, to consciously change and improve your patterns of behavior, will dramatically increase your personal effectiveness.

Many of us today are faced with the need to learn some of the most important lessons of our lives. Professionally, the learning mandate ranges from such matters as how to lead a team, how to influence people you're not the boss of, how to take on one more project when you're booked solid. Personally, most of us are dealing with such issues as the need to find more constructive resolutions to conflict in intimate relationships, raising children in an age when the stakes of peer pressure are higher than ever, finding calm in the midst of stress.

The methods in this book—which require small, daily effort—can help you inventory the areas of your life where change is most needed. The methods will then help you start producing the life results you're looking for.

## **Creative Tension**

IF YOU CHOOSE TO ACCEPT THE MISSION of profiting from your experience, the profit you realize will come from the creative tension that steady discipline brings about.

To understand the kind of tension I'm talking about, hold a rubber band between your two hands, and stretch it tight by moving your right hand away. Move as far with your right hand as you can without breaking the rubber band. Feel the tension.

Before going any further, notice that you have already made at least one choice. You have decided to go get a rubber band, or not, and you have decided how tightly to stretch it.

The rubber band is a metaphor for life.

Think of your left hand as the status quo, your circumstances as they presently exist. Think of your right hand as the direction in which you would like to move.

Now, relax the tension on the rubber band by moving *only one hand*.

Once again, you made a decision. Your hands didn't decide. The rubber band didn't decide. Did you go to the left or the right?

The natural choice, by the way, is to let the right hand move back to the left, the status quo. Nobody likes to change. Why fix what ain't broke? If that was your choice, you now have to think about something else. Namely, was the decision not to change a good one, or should you reconsider? This choice, too, is yours alone. You can't avoid making choices.

By the way, even though this may strike you as a simple idea, if you didn't actually pick up a rubber band and perform the demonstration, you still can't grasp the point. A major premise of this book is that intellectual understanding alone is inadequate.

Simply having this kind of internal conversation can change your life. It reflects heightened consciousness and persistent self-reflection. We control our destinies in direct proportion to our self-awareness. Two thousand years ago a Chinese sage, Lao Tsu, put it this way: "Those who know

*We control our destinies in direct proportion to our self-awareness.*

much about others may be smart, but those who understand themselves are even wiser. Those who control many may be powerful, but those who have mastered themselves are more powerful still.”

There is nothing exotic about the techniques you are about to learn. Like most ideas, these are mostly borrowed. They are simply arranged here in a way that many of my clients and I have found helpful. They really will produce creative tension in your life, and the tension will at least cause you to choose how, or whether, you want to learn something new.

## Looking Within

ACCORDING TO HINDU LEGEND, there was a time on Earth when people possessed the wisdom of the gods. But the veil of physical life kept human beings from fully appreciating this gift. Brahma concluded that it was wrong to leave such precious treasure lying at the feet of sleepwalkers. So he decided to hide it where only the most persistent would ever discover it.

“Let’s bury it deep in the earth,” one god suggested.

“No,” replied Brahma. “People will dig down in the earth and find it.”

“Then let’s put it in the deepest ocean,” said another.

Brahma rejected that idea, too. “People will learn to dive and will find it someday,” he said.

A third god asked, “Why don’t we hide it on the highest mountain?”

Brahma answered, “No, people can climb the highest mountain. I have a better place. Let’s hide it deep inside the people themselves; they’ll never think to look there.”

## Committing to Action

THIS BOOK GREW OUT OF YEARS OF WORK I have done with large organizations. For the most part, these organizations are run by people with more than enough education, intelligence, and expertise. But time and again I see executives and managers do something irrational and inexplicable. On the one hand, they grasp new concepts of learning, growing, improving. Then they turn around and go back to their old ways, making decisions and interacting with others just as they always have, as if they’ve learned nothing and don’t need to change at all.

Concepts of profound personal and organizational renewal are easy to understand. Acting on them takes discipline, plus a personal commitment to learn, and go on learning, what our changing environment has to teach. The material in this book is a balance of concept and action—daily action, constant action. Without the action, the concepts are interesting but not much else.

Most of us don’t learn useful things from our experiences, at least not consistently. Our learning is often by accident, and it doesn’t come easily. We often learn dysfunctional behaviors—hating or blaming other people, pouting, being depressed. What we want, of course, is to learn how to think

and behave in ways that accomplish our purposes with grace and flexibility.

What follows are some ideas and exercises that will start you on an expedition to uncover the treasure Brahma hid within you. Happy hunting.

***“A successful career will no longer be about promotion. It will be about mastery.”***

—MICHAEL HAMMER

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# Personal Change: Why Is It So Hard?

*“Old habits are strong and jealous.”*

—DOROTHEA BRANDE

TODAY WE KNOW there’s physiological evidence for Pogo’s famous observation—“We have met the enemy and he is us.” The enemy, apparently, is between our ears.

The good news is the brain’s phenomenal power. It’s estimated that a single human brain has the switching capacity of the entire U.S. telephone network. It can hold up to 100 trillion bits of information, dwarfing the capacity of any computer in the land.

The bad news is that the brain can act as a prison unless we learn how to control it. The brain can, and often does, lock us into automatic perceptions and behaviors that are inaccurate, ineffective, or downright destructive.

How the human brain works is worth noting if we want to change.

At birth it is a uniquely incomplete work of art. No other newborn creature experiences such brain expansion—doubling in the first six months, then again by age four.

***Our life experiences shape our view of the world.***

Simultaneously, the body's hundred billion nerve cells form a river of information that saturates every organ, every muscle, with perception, with knowledge, with memory. When something happens—an event, a thought—neurotransmitters flash across synapses in twinkle-sized units of time. In a nanosecond the experience of life has impressed itself into our blood, our bones, our brains. Before we know it, our lives are being composed.

So here is a basic reality: *our life experiences shape our view of the world*. Not only psychologically, but physically. Throughout childhood, the human brain is a frenzied construction site, where neural structures are assembled in response to events and thoughts, and countless circuits in the brain are rushed to completion. In the course of this construction, some connections are bolstered into massive conduits of habit. Others are systematically diminished and sometimes even dismantled.

## **Hard-Wiring of the Adolescent**

THE INTENSIVE BRAIN DEVELOPMENT of early childhood is followed by an amazing event. During a single three-week period of adolescence, power to the construction site of the brain is drastically cut back. The brain's metabolism falls to half its previous rate.

This occurs in the life of every individual, and it so profoundly impacts the way we lead our lives, it might actually be the single most important event in each of our lives. Why? Because it locks us into

a way of being that will govern our lives more forcefully, and more ruthlessly, than any tyrant.

Of course, we can all change and adapt well into old age. It's just that until this point in time, learning comes much more easily. The child's natural philosophy is "I don't know how the world works. . . . Tell me, show me, feed me."

After that three-week passage into neural maturity—a passage that coincides with the ability to reproduce—the young adult's philosophy becomes "Now I know about the world. . . . I'll tell you."

Dr. Robert B. Livingston, who has been a professor at Stanford, Yale, Harvard, and UCLA, and who is considered one of America's foremost brain researchers, points out that at this unconscious and momentous turning point in adolescence, our experience of the world becomes "biologically wired into the brain." In the journal *Timeline* he described it this way:

You're no longer so smart, so quick, so good at remembering or building new circuits. Already unique to begin with, genetically, you have made a nervous system that is astonishingly unique, and your programmed world view becomes quite frozen. It is well defended and sacred, and nobody can change it. It's stuck there, culture bound, bound by your past experience, bound in accordance with your purpose at the particular moment. And it is guarded automatically and involuntarily because your life depends on it. If you ride a bicycle, you don't have time to have a

parliament in the head when an immediate response is required; you have to act now.

So there you have it. At age thirteen (or twelve or fourteen, whenever your turning point occurred), your brain said, “Fantastic! Good enough! We’re finished! Lower the scaffolds. It’s time to go home.”

And one would hope that your parents, and your siblings, your teachers, aunts and uncles, grandparents, and all your friends, your society, even your enemies or critics, were brilliantly synchronized and lovingly coordinated to program and enrich your brain so that it would serve your highest goals, all your life long.

But if your brain’s software has some glitches, if your universe doesn’t reflect the harmony, beauty, love, and fulfillment that you deserve, then you might want to learn the “art of consciousness,” the ability to become master of the self instead of its slave.

## Mastering the Self

TO TRULY KNOW ONESELF is to explore the huge range of responses and creative acts that we can bring to life instead of the narrow repertoire of past habits we call the personality. At the heart of this lesson is a priceless insight: though you *have* a mind, you are *not* your mind. You are the one who administers the mind, Chief Executive Officer of the self. Who you are is the one who can change your mind, change your programming.

We aren't taught this, the art of consciousness, in school. This is a curious oversight in a society that celebrates liberty, for without the ability to control the mind no one can ever be free, no matter the military might of one's country. The art of consciousness is a skill that has been singularly lacking throughout history, and this may help explain why history repeats itself. It certainly explains why most of us spend our lives making many of the same mistakes over and over. There is no question that a critical mass of people practicing the art of consciousness would change the course of history. There is no question that those who become conscious, who come into their right minds, do change their own lives in proportion to their self-awareness.

The ability of people to become truly self-aware, to learn continuously from experience, and to constantly choose from an infinite range of viewpoints and actions those that promise the best results, instead of those that are most familiar and require the least change, is the breakthrough upon which the future of humanity might well depend. Closer to home, it might mean the future of a job, a career, an important relationship, prosperity, health, or an inner sense of gratification and serenity.

*Though  
you have a  
mind, you are  
not your  
mind.*

## Changing Your World View

SO THIS EXOTIC MISSION, to change the hard-wiring of your brain, is before you. If you choose to accept it, you need to know the bad news: this kind of change is very hard. But the good news is that it's

*The brain responds to learning much as muscle responds to exercise.*

easier than overcoming a physical dependency, such as alcoholism or smoking—and people manage to shake such addictions all the time.

Besides, learning is inherently rewarding. Research shows that the brain responds to learning much as muscle responds to exercise—that is, strong, new, life-supporting tissue is created. In the brain, the new tissue is actually the synaptic connecting matter between brain cells. Evidence suggests that a healthy network of these neural branches—they're called dendrites and they resemble a meandering river system—may, among other things, delay the onset of Alzheimer's disease and aid in recovery from strokes.

Dr. Livingston offers a straightforward prescription for improving the brain's hard-wiring:

If you want to shift somebody's world view, you have to get them to spend a lot of time thinking about alternative world views, spend a lot of time encouraging them, seducing them, exercising in that new equilibrium state so that they become familiar with it and know whether or not they like it better than the old one. Suddenly, they realize that they've been captured; it's like a transformation, a religious conversion, like falling in love. And when that happens, it has a long duration. It may last forever. You have a different attitude toward everybody on the globe. You are a different person, you have different commitments, you have different judgments in relation to everything—economics, society, language—

you can't put your finger on any part of your life that isn't affected by that conversion. And it makes it easy and automatic to operate once you're in that new equilibrium. You don't have to resort to apologies or going back to see what it would look like from the old vantage point. You just proceed head on.

A woman I know had an experience that illustrates Dr. Livingston's point. She was working as a registered nurse in the child psychiatric unit of a hospital. As it turned out, many of her colleagues, men and women, were gay. My friend had been raised in a fundamentalist Christian home and had deep prejudices regarding homosexuals.

On top of the tremendous stress of the job, the unit was small, which meant that staff worked shoulder to shoulder, often literally wrestling together with their young charges. For many months my friend couldn't shake the considerable discomfort she felt at working with homosexuals.

And then something happened. It slowly dawned on her that she respected her colleagues. Not only were they skillful, they were unusually loving and compassionate people. They epitomized the ideals of nursing. And yet, they had unaccountably chosen a lifestyle that my friend believed to be wrong.

One day she asked a male colleague a personal question: had he ever tried being with a woman? In deepest sincerity, she suggested that if he would just date a few women he might find that he was, well, normal after all. The man could see that my

friend cared for him and that she meant well. With equal sincerity, he asked her how she knew that she was heterosexual. Had she ever just tried being with a woman?

For some reason, that one question was like an earthquake. In an instant, as surely as she knew that her own sexual orientation was not an issue in her life, she realized that the sexuality of others no longer was either. In the blink of an eye, what had been a painful barrier between her and her co-workers vanished.

An added bonus of this shift: my friend reports she has never again felt separated from others simply because they are different from her.

## The Currents of Change

CHANGE IS A RIVER WITH MANY HEADWATERS, and those who study the watershed are filing interesting reports these days. Political observers, for instance, tell us that because of rapid social change, the maps of our school days are really antiques and should be replaced by three-dimensional cartography. Borders are giving way to moving centers of power, a trait of the Middle Ages. And, as environmental experts like Barbara Tuchman Matthews warn, the world's policy makers haven't even begun to realize the extent to which modern societies "depend on the underpinning of natural systems"—natural systems that are being worn away by a variety of pressures.

Meanwhile, one of the most common of all elements, information, is transforming our

economic foundations. Information has become more valuable than precious metals, water, or oil. More than any other resource, it may soon separate have from have-not nations.

Who knows where these trends will lead? At least in human terms, ours is an old planet. Big things happen from time to time. If all the world's a stage and all its people players . . . well, then, you might say that every so often the Great Playwright rearranges the set and edits the script. The climate changes, plagues sweep the countryside, landforms get moved around like props, plants and animals come and go.

How will the human imagination be used, how will the *will* be focused, what values and new skills will sculpt our lives? None of us can control the world, of course, but each of us—alone—controls his or her response to it. Choice is a basic force in human affairs, a powerful force, and our choices form headwaters of their own. Of course the world shapes us; but we shape our world, too.

In the world of business, not so very long ago, people who worked on “improving themselves,” people who read “self-help” books and occasionally slipped away to weekend seminars about how to find themselves, these people were seen as . . . well, eccentric . . . soft, somehow. If they ran into each other at a workshop, they would acknowledge one another furtively, like illegal aliens. They knew that back in the real world of the mainstream their willingness to explore the examined life made them irresistible targets of satire. Even in today's enlightened times, such fear is not without basis.

*Of course  
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too.*

In a recent cartoon featured in the *Harvard Business Review*, for example, an executive fresh from a training retreat says to colleagues around a conference table: “Before we begin the meeting, I’d like everyone to relax by crowing like a rooster.”

By and large, however, the business press doesn’t make fun of personal change as much as it used to. This might be because the old, reliable formulas for success and profitability are being swept away by tidal waves of collapsed markets, unwieldy bureaucracies, and rampant technological changes.

Some U.S. Department of Labor analysts predict that by the year 2000 there will be regular full-time jobs for only half of the nation’s workers. They predict that the other half—about 60 million people—will have to content themselves with the part-time leftovers or something else.

No wonder *Fortune* magazine is urging its readers to wake up and smell the coffee. In an article called “A Manager’s Career in the New Economy,” it set forth an assortment of sobering possibilities like these:

- Regular jobs may evaporate, replaced by hand-picked task forces that come together for specific projects, then disband when the projects are over.
- The American economy will be transformed into “one-person organizations” as information technology, especially the computer network, allows more and more work to be outsourced. (One MIT professor says

that a global network of one-person companies could actually design, manufacture, and market a new car right now.)

- “Hyperspecialists” are about to inherit an electronically unified global marketplace.
- Managers as a higher-paid class of workers are about to go the way of the passenger pigeon because their services will no longer add enough value to justify their higher pay.

*Fortune* didn’t go too far out on a limb when it peered into its crystal ball and predicted that “millions, perhaps the majority of the population, will be troubled by the change.” But the most troubling thing won’t be just that the work is new, but that only a new kind of worker will be able to do it.

*Fortune* came right out and said it: “Know thyself.” Since when has that ever been a job requirement? Welcome to the new world. *Fortune* put it this way:

“The key to success, perhaps even to survival, in the new world is, pardon the already too familiar expression, lifelong learning. For managers and executives, the most painful learning—like knowing thyself—may prove the most valuable.”

For their book *Credibility: How Leaders Gain and Lose It, Why People Demand It*, James Kouzes and Barry Posner asked fifteen thousand working people to assess the leaders in their lives. The verdict they were handed was that the foundation of the relationship between leaders and employees has crumbled. Yet workers are searching for leaders

“who are honest, forward-looking, inspiring, and competent.” These are the qualities that add up to credibility, the backbone of leadership, say Kouzes and Posner. They propose a personal regimen whereby leaders can cultivate credibility. Their first recommendation: continuously explore the inner self.

## Accepting the Mission

THIS BOOK IS DESIGNED TO ASSIST PEOPLE in this exploration. Because real learning has to leap the awkward chasm from thought to action, I have incorporated a few exercises that I humbly suggest you do.

There’s nothing esoteric about these exercises. If any of them don’t seem to work for you, fine. Move along to the next one without guilt. There are no universal formulas. The sequence in which you do the exercises isn’t especially critical. More than anything else, they will simply provide you with a stimulus for new ways of thinking, integrated into some form of action.

In more than fifteen years of coaching executives in the art of consciousness, I have seen repeatedly that hard-wired habit usually cannot be changed with new understanding alone. The learning and changing most people want comes about through small, daily *practice* of new behaviors and thoughts.

There is considerable evidence supporting the premise that it takes most people twenty-one days to change habits—that is, to experience and integrate

new behaviors. That's why this book is designed to be used over that period of time. But don't be hung up on that number. The point is, this technology is designed to produce real change that is otherwise difficult. It is not a quick fix. In the overall scheme of your life, a half hour a day for twenty-one days is not a big deal, but it *is* an investment. Take three or four weeks to learn the discipline; take the rest of your life to practice. If it takes you two or three months to get through these exercises, that's fine. Skip around if you like. Respect your own rhythm of learning.

First step: get yourself a notebook to be used as a journal. Or, use the blank pages at the end of this book. In the journal you will do the written exercises, make notes about your progress, and record your thoughts.

In case you're wondering why you should go to the trouble of actually writing down your responses to the exercises, I'd like to share an answer given to me by one of the people kind enough to review this book in an earlier, manuscript form. "Journaling," he said, "takes away the wiggle room you can leave yourself as you ponder these questions."

Wonderful image. There is no surer way *not* to profit from experience than by wiggling away from the sometimes uncomfortable lessons that tough issues bring.

If you don't want to do any exercises, but just want to read, you may find the book interesting, but in all likelihood it won't prove to be especially useful. In order to use *Profit from Experience* for

*Learning and changing come about through small, daily practice of new behaviors and thoughts.*

actual growth and development, you'll need to incorporate the new patterns into your life in a disciplined way.

One last thing: be kind to yourself in doing the exercises. If you feel resistant to some of them—or even intimidated—just know that can be a signal an exercise holds special value for you. But don't bludgeon yourself into doing it. Proceed with patience and kindness. Teachers of meditation like to use the phrase “training the puppy” as a way of describing the gentleness required to gain maximum benefit from the practice. That is the proper spirit with which to incorporate the *Profit from Experience* exercises into your life. The idea is to be gentle but clear.

***“In a time of drastic change  
it is the learners who inherit the  
future. The learned usually find  
themselves equipped to live in a  
world that no longer exists.”***

—ERIC HOFFER