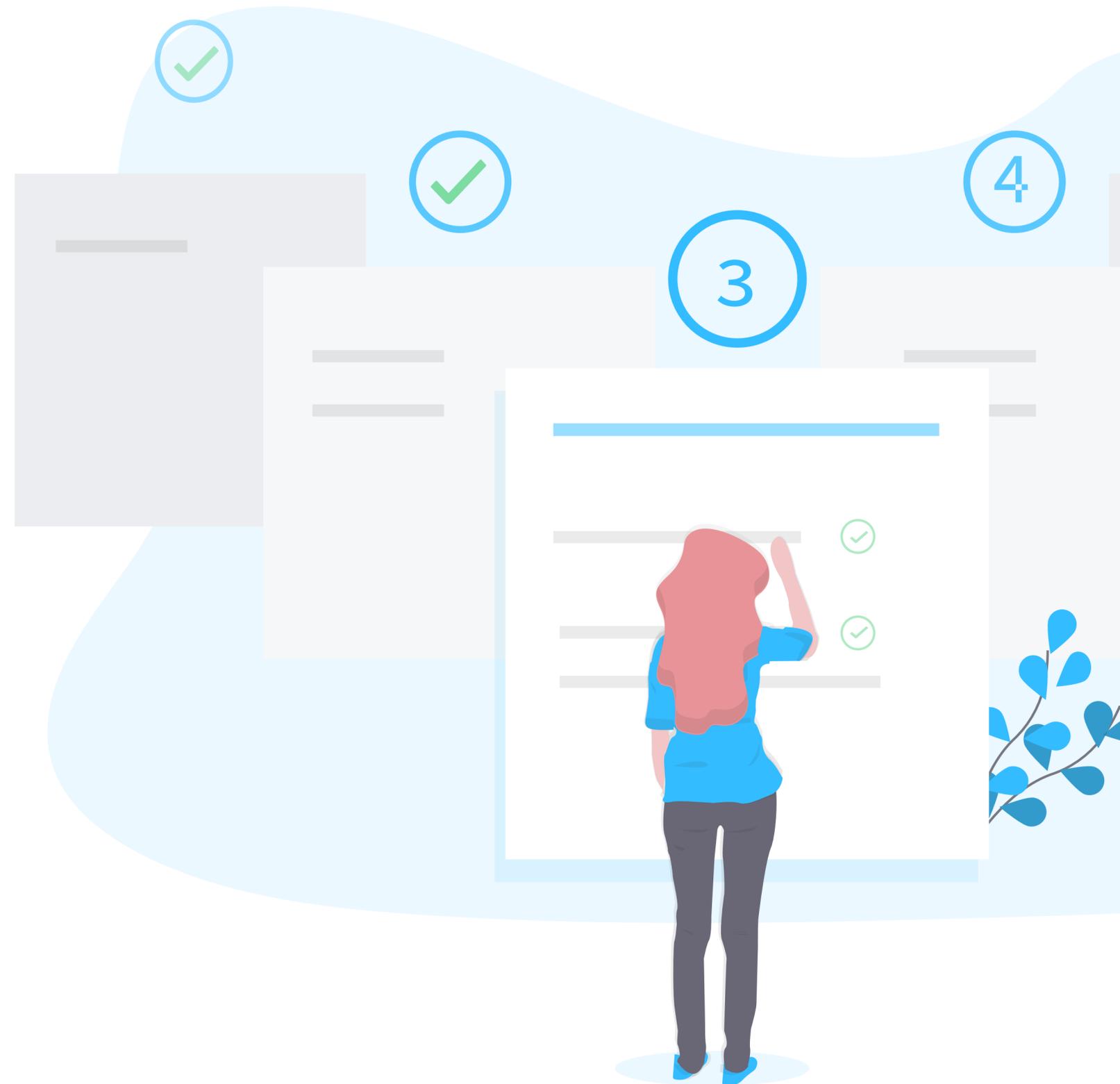


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How to become a more proactive learner

A playbook on how to structure your learning process in order to easily achieve your goals.

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What is self directed learning?

Imagine you purchased a sailboat. Your idea is to explore the world, but you're not sure how to start. You have two options:

- You either hop on and go wherever the wave drives you;
- Or make a plan. Think about travel companions, possible destinations, and useful resources.

To hop on the boat and explore the world seems exciting. But think about it. You'll wake up in the middle of the sea, alone. You'll have no supplies. You won't know where the closest land is and you have no means of communication. You could be saved, robbed by pirates, or end up dead.

Now think about the alternative. Before going on this one-in-a-lifetime trip, you take 3-4 days in advance to plan it. You gather some friends and get them excited about the

destination. Think about how much food, water, chips, soda, fruits you need to survive. Consult a map and learn the nearby lands and who else is sailing around you. Define a road map and set a timeline. After doing all this, hop on and enjoy your experience. If any challenges arise you'll be ready to face them.

Sailing is a lot like learning. Of course, it's not like we end up dead if we get stuck in the learning process. But the feeling sometimes seems close enough. You feel like you're not getting anywhere. It's hard to track where you are. You can't see the improvements. You feel like you want to get over with it. You feel disappointed.

Like in sailing, there's an alternative to jumping in learning something. It's called Self-Directed Learning. And this is what we're going to explore in the following pages.

Both options come with pros and cons, but for the purpose of this playbook we'll talk about how to be a structured explorer. Because this is exactly what Self-Directed Learning is about.

- **Short history**

Self-Directed Learning turned 47 years old in 2018. The adult educator Malcolm Knowles came up with the concept. We know him for his impact in different learning theories:

- Andragogy. A collection of methods and principles used in adult education;
- Humanist Learning Theory. A pedagogical approach that believes learning is a personal act to fulfill one's potential;
- Learning Contracts. An agreement established between a student and the teacher. Their purpose is to give students ownership for their learning process.

All of his theories have something in common:

- They see learning as a life-long process;
- They transfer the ownership to the learner through different processes;
- They establish structures to guide learning experiences.

Before jumping into definitions, plans, and objectives, let's take a step back. Becoming an agile learner is critical these days!

Why? Well, Knowles answers this question best in his book, *Self-Directed Learning*:

One immediate reason is that there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn more things, and learn better, than do people who sit at the feet of teachers passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners).

To be adequate for our strange new world we must come to think of learning as being the same as living. We must learn from everything we do; we must exploit every experience as a "learning experience."

It is no longer realistic to define the purpose of education as transmitting what is known. In a world in which the half-life

He compared his results with the original articles and corrected his work. This provided real time feedback on the outcome of his efforts.

By doing this over and over again, he spotted his problem. He lacked vocabulary. Not that he didn't know the words, but he couldn't recall them when needed. So he engaged in other types of writing – poetry. He thought poetry would force him to come up with all kinds of words he wouldn't think otherwise due to the poem's rhythm and rhyming pattern.

He picked up again The Spectator articles and transformed them into verse. After a while, waiting enough for his learning to fade away, he turned them back into prose.

As a final step, he worked on structure and logic engaging in the same recollection exercise.

Benjamin Franklin knew what he wanted to learn. He set specific learning goals. He improvised learning methods and

he always tracked his process. He ended up being a great writer. His autobiography became one of the classics of American literature.

Benjamin Franklin applied the theory of Self-Directed Learning long before any psychologist came up with it. So did other world-class performers.

They had:

- Awareness - they knew what they need to learn, and they understood the purpose of the learning process, which grows motivation.
- Process - They went from learning in a superficial way to in-depth learning.

You can do that too. You will learn faster than others. You will start seeing more learning opportunities. You will be aware and more disciplined in your learning process.

Over the next pages we'll go through each step. We'll define what we want to learn, set learning goals, choose resources and measure the outcomes of the process. Moreover, we'll find out how to stay engaged, get over roadblocks and reach the goals we set.



Choosing what to learn

There are as many things to learn out there as there are destinations a sailor can travel to. But you don't want to go everywhere and you don't want to learn everything.

There's only 24 hours in a day, unfortunately, and we have limited energy and money as well. When you're not strategic into how you spend your energy and resources, you might waste them.

As the SDL definition says, you need to understand what you need and want to learn. Be them long or short term - pinpoint your learning needs.

It might not be easy at first. That's due to the fact that we weren't used and educated to invest time and energy in this. In school everyone has the same agenda and there's someone telling you what you should learn every step of the way.

This turns us into what Knowles calls reactive learners. Reactive learners are those who don't question why they learn. Those who wait for others to show them what are their needs and how to learn things. Who don't know how to measure their growth. An attitude which is, as we've already established, no longer sustainable.

We need to shift our mindset. We need to become proactive learners.

- **Analyzing your learning needs**

Since we're just starting to build our learning plans, we can let our creative juices flow. Brace yourselves, because the exercise I propose is a real challenge. It will take you out of your comfort zone by asking you to get feedback from others. It will make you think about all the things you don't know yet. It will take time.

Think about what you want to learn and write down the first 30 things that come to mind. To help through the process, consider answering the following questions:

- What are my passions? (is it history, psychology, cooking, sports, drawing, foreign languages etc.)
- What technical or soft skills does my role/career require?
- Are there any projects I know I'd like to take on in the future? What skills will they require?
- Is there any trend I relate to and I would like to find out more about?
- If you're still in school - what are you learning right now?

Tips & tricks:

- Ask others for their opinion (your manager, colleagues, friends). They will help you assess your needs more accurately;
- Be honest. Note only those things you know you'd like to learn (don't list all the languages out there);

- Take your time. As I said before, it's not an easy exercise, and will require your attention for a longer period of time.
- If you don't want to stop at 30, great. Let them be! We'll prioritize later.

Setting your learning objective

Now you should have a list of things you want to learn long-term. It's time to start prioritizing. Keep in mind though, if you skipped the previous exercise, the following chapters won't be as effective. A little introspection never killed nobody.

- **Make it 4**

The list in the previous exercise should have at least 30 things you would like to learn. But remember you have limited energy, time & money. You can't invest all your resources in 30 learning objectives at the same time and expect each on of them to bring the same results or satisfaction.

First you had to think long-term, now the challenge is to think about the near future. I'm sure there are things on your list

you already know you won't take on in the following year. Don't remove them altogether, but set them aside for now. Don't worry, you will get back to them, probably even more prepared to achieve your goals.

What about the next 6 months? Are there any important things that must be tackled in the mid-term? Stick with 4 for now.

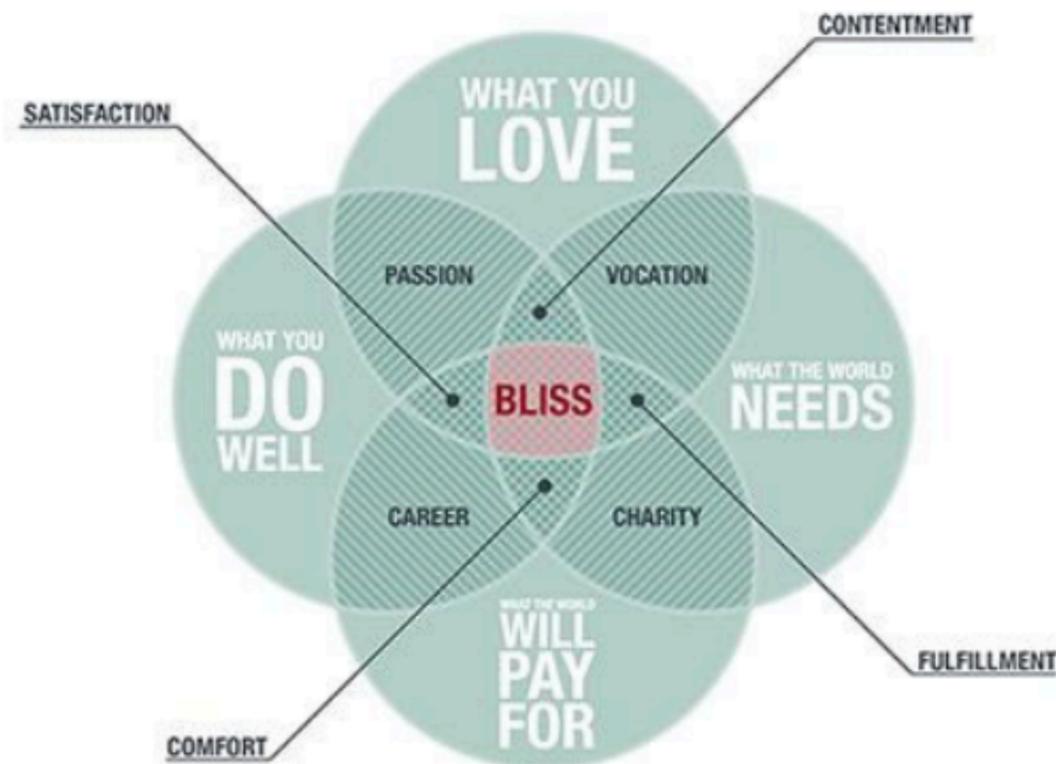
- **Tips and tricks**

There are three factors you have to take into account when thinking about how to prioritize:

- What you love
- What you're good at
- What the world needs.

This way it will be easier to focus your learning towards something that's not only beneficial to you, but also to your peers, close friends and the world as a whole.

DOING YOUR BEST WORK



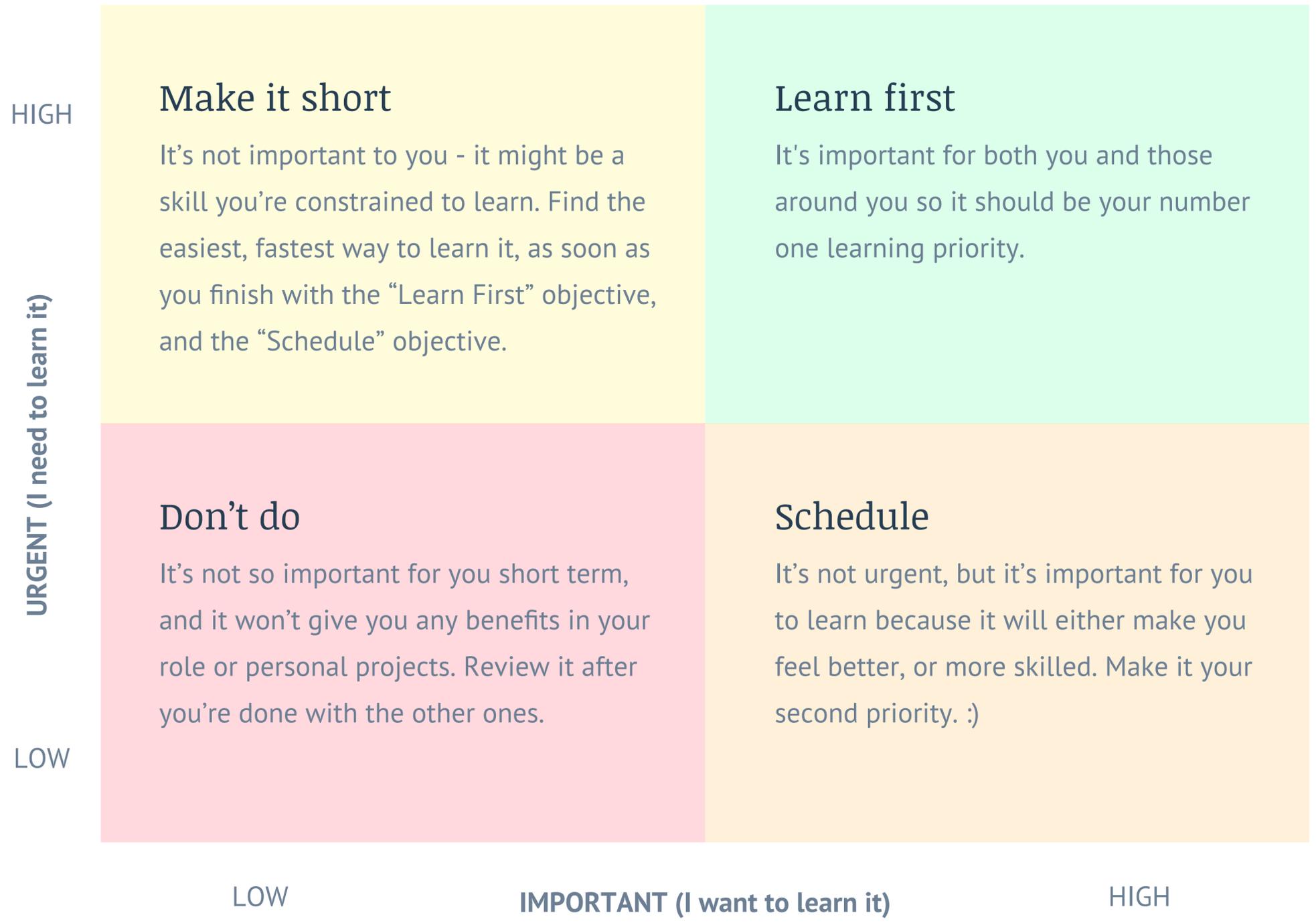
- What's urgent? What's important?

Now that we've narrowed down the list of learning objectives, let's dig even deeper. Don't get me wrong, learning is a continuous process, regardless of where it happens. We'll keep learning a lot of things even after setting goals.

But right now, the purpose is to learn to pick one thing to focus on. To organize your calendar, find resources and measure. It will give you a sense of accomplishment. making you more aware of what you know when you need to use your skills, take on projects and so on.

You probably already heard about the Eisenhower Matrix. It's a tool which helps you rank your tasks by urgency and importance. Adding a twist, I turned it into a 4-box tool to help you rank your learning objectives.

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Is there a learning goal in the "Learn first" box?
Cool, that's the one!

Building Learnmaps

Congrats! You took the first steps. You analyzed your learning needs. You prioritized what you want to learn. You set yourself an achievable, time-framed learning goal. For this section, let's get back to our sailing metaphor.

When constructing the road map for our expedition we first look at the bigger picture. We want to get from point A (which is where we are now), to point B (where we want to get). How will we know, though, while we're at sea, that the road we're taking is the right one? Which are the smaller steps along the way that confirm we're on the right path?

Luckily, sailors have a clear map with lands or position as checkpoints. But the questions is, can you track our learning process like sailors track their journey? Can you check regularly if you're on the right track? Can you enjoy wins along the way to keep the motivation high?

The answer is, of course, yes. But to do that, we have to better understand our learning goal. To give you a clear example, I will go back to my example of developing skills in coaching.

When starting to learn about coaching, I could have just jumped into it. I would've tried to understand and do everything right from the start. The question I had, though, was what did "everything" mean. So I started researching about the smaller-skills I'd have to gain to be a good coach. The list I ended up with was the following:

- Knowledge about coaching (history, benefits, purpose)
- Knowledge about different coaching tools
- Good listener
- Aware
- Self-aware
- Attentive
- Retentive
- Patient
- Supportive

Instead of trying to be good at coaching as a whole right from the start, I knew I had to improve certain smaller skills.

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● Build your own learnmap

If you are lucky enough, you might know someone who already masters the thing you want to learn. If you do, approach him with the following questions:

- What are the basic things you should know?
- How does he assess if someone masters the skill/ content of your learning goal?
- What are the things they know/ do, that make them trustworthy on the subject/ skill?
- What would they learn if they would be a beginner again?

Write down everything. If you know more than one person, gather insights from everyone, then build the list using their answers. Keep in mind that once someone is good at something, they aren't usually aware of what they know or

what were the steps that brought them to where they are.

You're responsible for paying attention to what they tell you. You have to extract insights, ask the right questions such as those mentioned above, and be patient all the way.

If there is no one around who could answer those questions, bring along your research skills.

- Search for books/ courses, look in the table of content and make lists of what you spot;
- Search for mind-maps, diagrams, frameworks on Google;
- Search on the internet for people who do know what you want to know. Read their interviews on the subject, see how they became good at it and what are the particular things people appreciate about them;

- **The benefits of building Learnmaps**

Like in sailing, sequencing your learning goal helps you prepare for the road ahead. You can enjoy it more, and make sure you're on the right track along the way.

When starting to learn something, the road from not knowing anything to being good at it seems long. If you don't know exactly whether you're improving or not, your motivation might drop. To prevent that, try to always be aware of the smaller wins along the way and celebrate them. It will keep you engaged and motivated.

Choosing your resources

- Learning methods

When we think about learning resources, there are a couple of things that always come to mind:

- Books
- Online/ In-class Courses
- Asking people

We usually stop here, and choose those methods who make us feel comfy. But the amount of ways of learning is way higher and diverse.

Also, when we choose resources close to our preferred learning style we're not improving faster. This has been proven by different studies. If you want to dig deeper in the subject I recommend this two research papers:

- [Learning Styles: Concepts and Evidence](#)
- [Testing the ATI hypothesis: Should multimedia instruction accommodate verbalizer-visualizer cognitive style?](#)

As I was saying, there is a bunch of ways to approach your learning goal. Here's a list of 10 learning methods you can try:

- Teaching someone else
- Keeping a journal/ Writing
- Creating mindmaps
- Organizing a study group
- Seeking direct experiences
- Being coached
- Conducting experiments
- Playing
- Creating symbols/ acronyms
- Attending presentations & lectures

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