



A WEEK IN *Learning*

ARTICLE

EMBRACE THE NEW YOU IN THE UNKNOWABLE FUTURE

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Starting a new year is always a good opportunity for both reflection and forward-thinking. Recently, I watched an excellent TED Talk by Shankar Vedantam that explores these two complementary ideas in an interesting way. Vedantam suggests that, when we build plans for our future, we often rely too much on our past experiences. He claims this is because our future is not just unknown – but unknowable. He also talks about this in terms of a paradox, noting that "when we look backward, we can see enormous changes in who we have become. But when we look forward, we tend to imagine that we will be the same people in the future."

This conflict of ideas sparked my curiosity – especially at the outset of a new year when so many of us are planning and visualizing what will be different (and better!) by December. Why do we put so much stock in what we have already experienced – and often avoid the idea of just how unknowable the future is? More importantly, what can we learn from this idea?

Change

In general, it's pretty easy to accept the idea of change. We may not like what changes occur, but we know it is inevitable. Interestingly, it is easier for us to accept change when it occurs in things such as projects, and organizations than accept changes in ourselves, rather than the fact that we – as humans – will inevitably change over time. Our brains are wired to make sense of the world and to help us survive. As a result, when we imagine ourselves in the future, we tend to focus on the surrounding environment and see ourselves as we are today. We instinctively want to prepare for future challenges with the tools and skills we have right now. Instead, Vedantam says we should work to "accept the idea that you're going to be a different person in 30 years' time."

Disagreement

Another thing that happens when we consider the future is that we assume how we view the world then would be the same way we feel about it now. All of us know this is not true. Twenty years ago, how did you feel about politics, the environment, social justice, the economy, or technology? If you are being honest, you definitely had a shift in opinion somewhere. Why? Because humans learn, we understand



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different points of view better and have experiences that add up and impact our worldview. With this in mind, Vedantam encourages us to "bear in mind that among the people who might disagree with us are our own future selves."

Wisdom

When we add up all the experience and learning that comes from the changes and disagreements noted above, we start to accumulate wisdom. This is a major benefit to us as we approach an unknowable future. As Vedantam notes, "Our future selves are also going to have capacities and strengths and wisdom that we do not possess today."

The Ship of Theseus

Look around and consider your place in the world. Now take a moment to remember your 2003 self. Finally, imagine your 2043 self. We are never the same person, but we retain the critical elements that make us who we are. This idea reminds me of the fable of the Ship of Theseus, and Vedantam also mentions this in his talk. In short, the story relates that after the great (Greek) warrior Theseus returned from battle, his ship was saved as a shrine and was sailed and celebrated for hundreds of years. Over this long stretch of time, each part of the ship had to be replaced because of wear and tear. So, was it still the original ship if all the parts were replaced? Vedantam says,

"You and I are walking examples of the ship of Theseus. Our cells turn over all the time.... It's the organization of the planks that makes the ship. It's the organization of the cells that make the body. If you preserve the organization, even if you swap planks or cells in and out, you still have the ship and the same body. But at a psychological level, each new layer that's put down is not identical to the one that came before it. The famous plasticity of the brain that we've all heard so much about means that, on an ongoing basis, you are constantly becoming a new person."

So welcome to 2023 and another step into our unknowable future. We hope you embrace the new "you" that you are constantly becoming. Your L&D Team looks forward to helping you along the way!

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