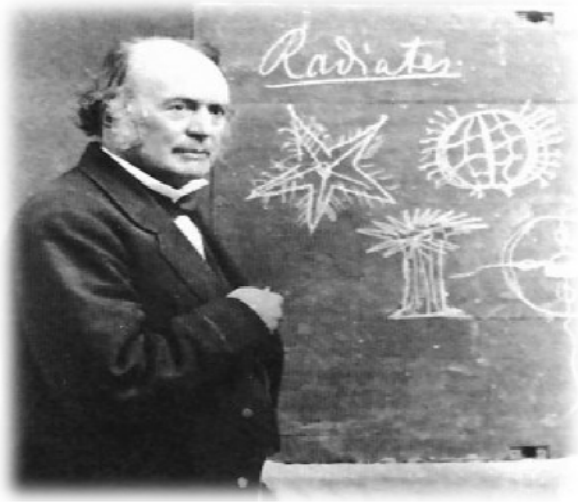


# The Freedom to Learn how to Lead: *How to Look at the Fish*



In his classic book, *The Freedom to Learn*, Carl Rogers states that the only learning that significantly influences behavior is “self-discovered, self-appropriated” learning. Only when the learner perceives value—learning that the learner finds compelling and relevant to his or her own purposes—will a significant amount of learning take place.

The familiar parable of leading a horse to water is buttressed by the fact you cannot make the horse drink the water. Sadly, we are all too familiar with this principle in our every-day life. However, I ask, isn't it important to find a way to influence the horse to partake of the water? After all, it's in the horse's best interest. Because this allegory offers a vital life lesson, it's worth finding ways to tackle this commonplace complication.

To do so let's step back in time to 1846 when a Swiss-born Louis Agassiz arrived in Boston poised and prepared to teach at Harvard University. Agassiz, a teacher of fish and fossils, came to be considered as a great professor at Harvard. Students and faculty revered the professor for his teaching methods. Students seeking a transformational journey eagerly enrolled in his class. You see, Agassiz was compelled to give his students the opportunity to think for themselves and to work out their observations and problems.

Transformational teaching is easy to suggest, but hard to produce. Few professors ever really achieve a meaningful metamorphosis of self and student. Agassiz's

style was chronicled in great detail by one of his students. Here is his account of the great Professor's teaching method:

“It was more than fifteen years ago that I entered the laboratory of Professor Agassiz, and told him I had enrolled my name in the Scientific School as a student of natural history. He asked me a few questions about my object in coming.... “When do you wish to begin?” he asked.”

“Now,” I replied. This seemed to please him, and with an energetic “Very well!” he reached from a shelf a huge jar of specimens in yellow alcohol. “Take this fish,” he said, “and look at it.... By and by I will ask what you have seen.” In ten minutes I had seen all that could be seen in that fish, and started in search of the Professor—who had, however, left the Museum.... Half an hour passed -- an hour --- another hour; the fish began to look loathsome. I turned it over and around; looked it in the face --- ghastly; from behind, beneath, above, sideways, at a three-quarters' view --- just as ghastly. I was in despair; at an early hour I concluded that lunch was necessary; so, with infinite relief, the fish was carefully replaced in the jar, and for an hour I was free.

On my return, I learned that Professor Agassiz had been at the Museum, but had gone, and would not return for several hours.... Slowly I drew forth that hideous fish, and with a feeling of desperation again looked at it. I might not use a magnifying glass; instruments of all kinds were interdicted. My two hands, my two eyes, and the fish: it seemed a most limited field. I pushed my finger down its throat to feel how sharp the teeth were. I began to count the scales in the different rows, until I was convinced that that was nonsense. At last a happy thought struck me --- I would draw the fish; and now with surprise I began to discover new features in the creature.

Just then the Professor returned.

“That is right,” said he; “a pencil is one of the best of eyes. “Well, what is it like?” He listened attentively to my brief rehearsal of the structure of parts whose names were still unknown to me....

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The Academy for Sport Leadership's underlying convictions are as follows: 1) the most important lessons of leadership are learned in real-life situations, 2) team leaders develop best through active practice, structured reflection, and informative feedback, 3) learning to lead is an on-going process in which guidance from a mentor, coach, or colleague helps facilitate learning and growth, and 4) leadership lessons learned in sport should transcend the game and assist student-athletes in developing the capacity to lead in today's changing environment.

When I finished, he waited as if expecting more, and then, with an air of disappointment: "You have not looked very carefully.... Look again, look again!" and he left me to my misery.

I was piqued; I was mortified. Still more of that wretched fish! But now I set myself to my task with a will, and discovered one new thing after another, until I saw how just the Professor's criticism had been. The afternoon passed quickly; and when, towards its close, the Professor inquired: "Do you see it yet?"

"No," I replied, "I am certain I do not, but I see how little I saw before."

"That is next best," said he, earnestly, "but I won't hear you now; put away your fish and go home; perhaps you will be ready with a better answer in the morning. I will examine you before you look at the fish."

This was disconcerting. Not only must I think of my fish all night, studying, without the object before me, what this unknown but most visible feature might be; but also, without reviewing my discoveries, I must give an exact account of them the next day. I had a bad memory; so I walked home by the Charles River in a distracted state, with my two perplexities.

The cordial greeting from the Professor the next morning was reassuring; here was a man who seemed to be quite as anxious as I that I should see for myself what he saw.

"Do you perhaps mean," I asked, "that the fish has symmetrical sides with paired organs?" His thoroughly pleased "Of course! Of course!" repaid the wakeful hours of the previous night. After he had discoursed most happily and enthusiastically ---as he always did --- upon the importance of this point, I ventured to ask what I should do next.

"Oh, look at your fish!" he said, and left me again to my own devices. In a little more than an hour he returned, and heard my new catalogue.

"That is good, that is good" he repeated; "but that is not all; go on;" and so for three long days he placed that fish before my eyes, forbidding me to look at anything else, or to use any artificial aid. "Look, look, look," was his repeated injunction.

This was the best entomological lesson I ever had --- a lesson whose influence has extended to the details of every subsequent study; a legacy the Profession had left

to me, as he has left it to many others, of inestimable value, which we could not buy, with which we cannot part.

Agassiz's training in the method of observing facts and their orderly arrangement was ever accompanied by the urgent exhortation not to be content with them.

"Facts are stupid things," he would say, "until brought into connection with some general law." At the end of eight months, it was almost with reluctance that I left these friends and turned to insects; but what I had gained by this outside experience has been of greater value than years of later investigation in my favorite groups.

Some of the most important insights about human behavior are by no means obvious. But the wisdom of English author Doug Adams offers such insight via a humorous look into the ever-present problem of leading a horse (people) to water only to not recognize the need to drink (learn). Adams wrote, "Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disinclination to do so." And so we must return to Carl Rogers' axiom that the only learning that significantly influences behavior is "self-discovered, self-appropriated" learning. Add to this the methodology of Louis Agassiz: lead the horse to the watering hole, then leave. Let the horse poke around the pond and look at the fish.

### **What they're Saying about *Coaching for Leadership***

*Cory Dobbs goes above and beyond making the case for team leadership and why it is a valuable leadership style. We are coaching in a changing world and our student-athletes are different. I am a big believer that it is our charge to teach leadership, more than ever before and sports can be by far, the best classroom. Cory's book gets you started.*

**-Kathy Delaney-Smith, Women's Basketball Coach, Harvard University**

*A thought-provoking guide to enlightened leadership and progressive team building behavior.*

**-Jerry Lynch, Ph.D., Author of *The Way of Champions and Coaching with Heart***