



BE THE STUDENT:
THE JOURNEY TO WISDOM
BEGINS WITH LISTENING

Justin Jones-Fosu

In 2003, as a young, ambitious twenty-something, I found myself touching down on the rich, red soil of Kenya for the first time. It was a journey I'd embarked on with a sense of exhilaration, mixed with a dash of youthful arrogance. I was there to serve the leader of our organization, a seasoned veteran, and his colleagues, who bore the wisdom of ages; they had experienced more than twice as much life as I had. (Note: I am not calling them old.)

My heart pounded with the urge to prove myself, to mark my existence in that space, to let them know that I, too, was someone to reckon with—not just a young fledgling but a repository of knowledge. Yet, in this relentless pursuit to demonstrate my worth, I lost sight of something profoundly significant: the opportunity to learn.

It was my mentor, Carlos, a figure of quiet wisdom, who saw my struggle. He saw me trying to jump into conversations. He saw me impose myself by sitting in the middle of the group and immediately piping up to share my perspective. He saw me trying to prove my worth rather than simply being my worth.

One warm afternoon, in a corner of our conference room, he gently nudged me as he saw me trying to lecture this group about my perspective. He asked me to be a fly on the wall, to observe, to listen, and to absorb. He challenged me, explaining that it wasn't my job to reshape the world with my fresh but limited wisdom; instead, I was there to serve, to learn from the experiences and insights of those who had walked the paths I was only beginning to tread.

The realization was a heavy one, but it set me free. I discovered that I had been so consumed in teaching, in giving unsolicited lectures, that I had forgotten to learn. The dynamics of power and knowledge seemed complicated, but the solution was surprisingly simple—I needed to become a student again, to tap into the humility of learning.

I call it the “fly-on-the-wall principle.” It doesn’t mean I have to remain silent or invisible all the time, but it encourages me to be a sponge, soaking up knowledge from those around me. This principle, born from the heart of Kenya, has since traveled with me to countless boardrooms and coffee shops, steering my interactions with peers and team members.

It’s not about how many facts we can recite, but how much we’re willing to learn from others.

Being a student has never diminished my worth; instead, it has enriched it. It has allowed me to learn, to grow, and to build an arsenal of wisdom that I can now share more meaningfully. I find that the lessons I’ve learned in the silence of observation are the ones that resonate the most when I do serve the role of a teacher. The paradox of it all is that, by embracing the role of a student, I’ve become a better—more insightful, more empathetic—teacher.

My journey from the city streets of Kenya to where I am now is a testament to the fact that sometimes our greatest strength lies in listening, in learning. The journey to wisdom does not always begin with a lecture but often with a silent pledge to remain a perpetual student, open to the world and its endless lessons.

I tell you this story to encourage you to heed the wisdom of Carlos and choose to be a learner. The question that lies ahead is whether we will choose to learn when faced with both the internal and external barriers of learning.

The Inverted U

The inverted U concept, or the Yerkes-Dodson law, states that our performance (or learning) is at an optimal state when we are slightly excited but not stressed out. This law can also apply to our perceived knowledge and its impact on learning. You can think of this as a continuum with “knowing nothing” at one end, “knowing everything” at the other, and an optimal learning zone somewhere in the middle.

At the “knowing nothing” extreme, a person may feel overwhelmed or unsure where to start, which can hinder motivation and engagement. It could lead to feelings of inadequacy or even evoke fear of failure, which can impede the learning process.

At the “knowing everything” end of the spectrum, a person may become complacent or overly confident. This can prevent them from seeking new information, questioning their understanding, or staying open to alternative perspectives. As a result, learning stagnates because there’s no perceived need for further knowledge or skill acquisition.

The peak of the inverted U represents an optimal state of perceived knowledge. In this state, an individual acknowledges that they know something but also understands that there's more to learn. They are confident enough to engage with the material, yet humble enough to recognize their limitations. This balanced mindset promotes curiosity, fosters resilience, and encourages an ongoing commitment to learning.

In summary, the inverted U concept in learning, in relation to perceived knowledge, suggests an optimal point where a balance between knowing and not knowing fosters the best learning outcomes. Both underconfidence and overconfidence can negatively impact learning, emphasizing the need for a balanced, growth-oriented mindset.

This is one reason why my colleagues and I encourage participants in our workshops to remember a time when they learned something new or that was challenging. Realizing they've done it before helps build their confidence. My team and I also encourage participants to think of moments in their life when they were proven wrong (which, of course, has never happened to me). The participants often share that their new learning or way of thinking was inspired by someone else.

Learning From Others

Just think about it: when we are learning-minded, we can learn so much from each other. As an ancient proverb wisely reminds us, "Intelligent people are always ready to learn. Their ears are open for knowledge."

That's a pretty cool way to think about intelligence, right? It's not about how many facts we can recite, but how much we're willing to learn from others.

And you know what? Learning from others doesn't mean we always have to agree with them. It's about showing them respect. Say you're grabbing coffee with a friend, and they share their opinion about something. You might not see eye to eye, but you listen and try to understand where they're coming from. That's what it's all about.

In fact, every conversation we have is an opportunity to learn. I've picked up as many life lessons from people who've made mistakes as I have from those who seem to have it all figured out, and those in between. It's like getting two-for-one lessons: learning what to do, and what not to do. Think about your own experiences. Haven't you learned a lot from both great and not-so-great bosses?

Sometimes we forget that everyone loves to express their opinion. Research has found that "people systematically underestimate the affective benefits others derive from expressing their opposing opinions."

We're meant to connect, share experiences, and learn from each other.

Simply put, we all want to be heard, and sometimes we forget to listen. That's when misunderstandings and conflicts can happen. Remember this when you're deep in conversation: be open to the other person, and learn from each other. If both parties are just talking to be heard and not listening, there really is no conversation.

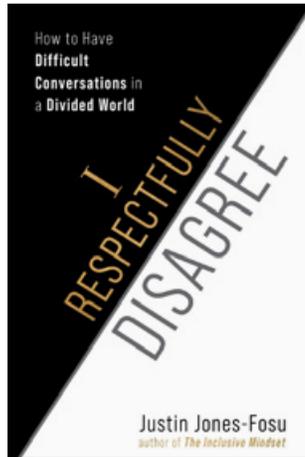
Now, let's stroll down memory lane. You might remember believing in Santa Claus as a kid. And then, one day, you heard from a friend at school that Santa isn't real (that kid should have been given extra nap time). You might have defended your belief tooth and nail, but eventually, you accepted the new reality. There have probably been many other beliefs you've adjusted or abandoned as you've grown, right?

Or think about how wary we used to be about having a new teacher at school. We felt they had something to prove and were a bit strict. But over time, we realized they were just trying to establish their style of teaching. It's a lot like when we learn something new. Initially, we might be overly enthusiastic about it, but with time, we gain a deeper understanding of how to share it with others.

As my wise friend Hassan Ghiassi once told me, "The answer you seek may be one conversation away." Isn't that something? We're not meant to go through life alone, figuring everything out by ourselves. We're meant to connect, share experiences, and learn from each other. It's like we're all stars in a huge, vast constellation of human beings. So, let's open up, get ready to listen, and learn from each other. **After all, that's what makes life such an exciting journey.** 📖



Info



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Justin Jones-Fosu is CEO of Work. Meaningful., a firm focused on workplace engagement and inclusion that he founded in 2007. He consults with, speaks to, and trains 10,000 to 20,000 people per year. He is a former radio host and former workplace contributor to NPR's *The Takeaway* and is known for his ability to connect to a broad range of people in a down-to-earth, humorous way. He is the author of *The Inclusive Mindset* and *Your Why Matters Now*.

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