Things I Learned From My Piano Teacher

by Paul Eldrenkamp

Not only do I lack any particular talent for playing the piano, but I didn't even start taking lessons until early middle age — far too late to develop the neural pathways I'd need to play well. As a result I'm not very good, and I never will be. But I go to my lessons, I practice as much as I can (I've gotten good at squeezing my daily one-hour practice session into as little as 10 minutes on some days), and, unexpectedly, I find a great deal of pleasure and satisfaction in my incompetent playing. It also turns out that taking piano lessons has benefits that go well beyond personal satisfaction — it's a great form of cross-training.

With any exercise regimen, months of repetition can make your body extremely efficient at performing certain movements — but only those movements. Someone can be in good enough shape to complete a three-hour marathon, for instance, but still be sore all over the day after playing a 30-minute game of pickup basketball. Doing only one kind of training limits your overall fitness and in fact reduces your overall training benefit. Rather than continuing to improve, you just stay at a certain level. This is where cross-training comes in — one reason that, for instance, sprinters spend a fair amount of time in the weight room working on upper-body strength.

Learning to play the piano is terrific cross-training for running a business. Following are some of the lessons my infinitely wise (and even more patient) piano teacher, Guy Urban, has taught me.

"Don't practice your mistakes."

I once started playing through a piece for my teacher and hit a wrong note about halfway through. I halted, said something to the effect of "Darn it, I always make that mistake," and then continued on.

My teacher stopped me, saying, "Why do you practice it that way, then?" And he was right: Through thoughtless repetition, that particular mistake had become to feel completely natural — almost part of the music.

There used to be a key moment in every sales meeting where I would always make the same mistake, a particularly dangerous one: I'd set too-low expectations regarding what the project would cost. My client empathy — or high need for approval, or whatever you want to call it — would kick in, and I'd tell the homeowners their kitchen might be about $60,000 when I knew in my bones it was not going to be a penny under $80,000.

My piano teacher told me how to stop practicing my mistakes: I should play right up to the note just before the one I kept missing and then stop short. I shouldn't play a single note until I knew it was the one I wanted to play. After a few times through this exercise, my fingers would be retrained, the pause would get shorter and shorter, and eventually the mistake would be permanently fixed. Similarly, when it came time at a sales meeting to discuss budget, I learned to pause, take a breath, and not say a word until I knew it was the right one.

"When performing, keep going even if you miss a note."

People listening to someone play music hear momentum and phrasing more than individual mistakes. If you stop short when you make a mistake (usually with a grimace), go back a few measures, and start the passage over, everyone will focus on the mistake. If instead you move right on past the problem with confidence and renewed accuracy, listeners will quickly forget the flaw. It's like an inadvertent insult: You can apologize profusely and at agonizing length, at which point the victim of the insult starts wondering whether it really was so inadvertent after all, or you can apologize quickly and just move on.

A few years ago we were planning a large project and the client kept adding features. The cost kept going up, and I did not do a good job of keeping them informed about the cost increases. Inevitably, it came time for a reckoning. I presented the revised budget, and they balked. I could have groveled in apology and backed off, and maybe thrown some money at the problem in a vain attempt to make what had already happened appear not to have happened after all.

Instead I said that I regretted the situation and we

could build the project for the budget as presented, cut the cost by removing some aspects of the project that had been added in, or agree to part ways. We agreed to part ways. Within a month, they had called me back and asked to get back on our schedule. This was a particularly lucky resolution (and most such stories do not have such happy endings, in reality). But even if they had not called back, I was better off moving on to the next step than I would have been if I'd tried to change current reality by backing up and starting over.

"Dissonance is not always ugly."

Most Bach keyboard works are pretty hard for me, so I have to learn them at a painfully slow tempo to get the fingering right. Playing slowly, I really hear how many dissonances there are in the music. (To understand what I'm talking about, play two adjacent keys on a piano. You're hearing a minor second, the most dissonant sound in tonal music.) Move through these dissonances slowly and it can sound like you're doing something seriously wrong in places. But get the piece up to tempo and you don't think twice about the dissonances — they fit right into the music. And, in fact, if you removed the dissonances, the music would become a lot less interesting — there'd be no sense of movement, no real interest or progress.

I had a brilliantly effective but prickly production manager for a number of years. We would seriously butt heads once every few months, and it was unpleasant when it happened. But we always came out of those meetings with better policies, better procedures, better ground rules — in short, with a better company.

Dissonance is essential to a small business just as it is to music: With no conflict, there can be no resolution. If you hit a dissonance and linger there too long, it's pretty ugly. But if you make a point to resolve the dissonance and continue forward, the sense of resolution and momentum is palpable — and life and business both are more interesting and rewarding as a result.

"Sometimes soft sounds really loud."

In some early 19th-century music you'll encounter a series of sequences in which each is indicated to be played louder than the last. Beethoven, for one, on occasion found that the only way he could make the last sequence sound loud enough was, paradoxically, by marking it to be played pianissimo (very soft). An extreme example of this is a moment in his Third Symphony that music analyst Leonard Meyer calls "the loudest rest in the history of music." The technique is amazingly effective, in the right hands.

This isn't just about resisting the urge to fill pauses in a sales meeting (a compulsion that's a common mistake); silence can be the most articulate, eloquent way to respond during a heated confrontation with a subcontractor or crew member. A very wise colleague of mine, Laura Ferrell of Woodenwings, once advised me to ask myself three questions before offering criticism: "Is it true? Is it helpful? Is it the right time?" If I can't answer "yes" to each question, I should remain silent.

"It's not the first beat that sets the tempo of a piece, it's the second."

You have a great, engaging first meeting with a client, and you really connect with each other — there's clearly a good fit. You leave the meeting with a real sense of excitement and purpose. Then it takes two or three weeks for you to get anything back to the client. You've started off with an exciting loud note, but the second note makes it clear this is a slow piece — maybe slow enough to put the clients to sleep, or send them off to another recital altogether.

"The way to overcome natural tendencies is to exaggerate the opposite tendency."

Novice piano players tend to make certain mistakes: They fail to hold fermatas (sustained notes or pauses) long enough or make staccato notes short enough. To counter these propensities, my teacher tells me to practice the passages in a way that sounds almost absurdly over-the-top to my ear. One outcome of this strategy is that sometimes playing in such an exaggerated fashion actually makes the passages sound just right to the listener, however unnatural it sounds to me. But the main reason he tells me to do this is so that I can increase my range of interpretation — and gain more interpretive tools than I come by naturally.

Years ago I had a production manager whom I had a hard time communicating with (and vice versa). We eventually did some Myers-Briggs training and found that he was an extreme extrovert, while I was pretty introverted. That helped explain why, at the end of a one-hour meeting, I'd be exhausted and ready to go slink into my corner while he was just getting warmed up.

The approach we took to try to improve communication was to have a set weekly meeting time and a clear agenda for each meeting — a list of topics we had to cover on a regular basis. This was more than I wanted to do but less than he did. It felt like a huge stretch for me, and still does. But — to get back to the cross-training analogy — pushing myself out of my comfort zone is the only way to grow and develop as a business owner.

"Some music is more beautiful than it can be played."

Musical notation, like words, can sometimes only hint at what you really want to say. Notes on the page, even beautifully played, may fall well short of what

the composer heard at the time he or she wrote them down.

I think we've all experienced something like this — had a great idea for a design, or a business opportunity, or even a column for *The Journal of Light Construction*. Then we tried to put the design on paper, or develop the opportunity, or write the column, and found that the thought was much more compelling than anything we could ever implement in reality. In other words, a lot of ideas end up seeming much more ingenious in our imaginations than they do when we actually try to put them into a form we could share with someone else.

Part of this has to do with the limits of communication; the imagination has fewer constraints than language does. But it also has to do with the way that reality just gets in the way: Other people have needs that conflict with ours; buildings can seem to have minds of their own; the laws of physics have a habit of setting some annoying limits on what — or how well, or how fast — we can build.

A small-business owner nonetheless needs to continue to make big plans, to think great thoughts, to aim for the ideal. Not just in business, but in life. If your whole existence is about your business, you'll have a shallower life and a weaker company. So consider coming up with your own form of cross-training. Choose something that will take you out of your comfort zone: tuba lessons, or a painting class, or tennis or soccer or curling lessons. You may never be great at your chosen skill, but you'll learn a lot, especially if you find a teacher as patient and perceptive as mine. Remember: All of us fall short sometimes — maybe even always. And that's okay, as long as it doesn't stop us from trying.

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