

Stepping Up to Success

One of the more critical times in the development of any team member is when a new procedure or change of routines occurs, including training new team members in the practice. The more we understand how the learning process actually works, the more likely we are to accelerate learning.

Most of us can remember being in school, but don't remember what exactly we learned there. This is poignantly demonstrated in the quiz show, *Are You as Smart as a Fifth-Grader*. The adult contestants do a lot more guessing at the correct answer than the actual fifth graders on the show.

It's not that the adults aren't smart; it's more true that basic education is designed to a) develop competency in basic skills needed to succeed in life (think the three "Rs"); and b) introduce and stimulate students' interests to pursue career paths. For instance, chemistry and physics classes either awaken an interest in the student to pursue a career in science or the material is forgotten after the final exam is over. The old saying "use it or lose it" is true.

In an age of instant communications, 24-hour news, microwave dinners, and the internet providing us with instant information on any subject we google, our expectations for learning new tasks may have also been shifted but in a way that hampers the learning process itself. Just because we "know" something, doesn't mean we have mastered it.

The first step up in the learning process is when you realize there is something that you don't know. This awareness gives you the choice of whether or not to pursue learning about the subject. For instance, I know I don't know how to fly an airplane, and I have chosen not to learn how. But once you choose to learn, you need to find a teacher, coach, or mentor who is an expert in the subject and is willing to teach you. The key to success in learning, though, comes from the student *practicing* what is being taught. For example, you can read books or take classes on the physics of balance involved in riding a bicycle and understand all the dynamics involved; but you won't really know how to ride a bike until you get on the bike and actually experience where balance occurs. To be able to ride with competency, you need to practice...a lot!

In busy practices, expectations are sometimes determined by the needs of the practice rather than the skill level of the employee. Patience, practice and praise are essential to the beginner's progress. You can accelerate the learning by focusing on what the beginner is doing right; and when a mistake is made, asking the person if she can identify where and why the mistake occurred. Praise is the most powerful teacher and stimulates more learning. Supervisors and those entrusted with training new members need to be particularly in tune with this.

Remember back to the time when you were a novice at a job. The pressure was on to do everything right and that alone is a stressful and unrealistic goal. During that beginning stage of learning, whether the focus was on the mistakes you made or on what you were doing right made all the difference in the world how you progressed on the learning curve, and on your whole attitude about work. In the book Whale Done by Blanchard, Lacinak, Tompkins and Ballard, the authors demonstrate how powerful and effective positive reinforcement is in training killer whales at Sea World to learn and perform tricks that delight and attract thousands of visitors every year.

The underlying principles for training are: be empathetic and patient with the student; set clear and reasonable expectations for performance; reinforce correct actions with praise, and use mistakes made as moments for learning with praise again for lessons learned. One final note, remember to apply these principles to yourself when learning new systems and implementing new ideas!