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MANAGEMENT PERSPECTIVES

Learning

From the Editor

Airports have turned themselves into shopping malls. Move over candy bars and newspapers — here come clothing stores, cosmetic shops, road houses, and, my favourite ... bookstores. This is where I idle away waiting time, browsing. I leave behind my To Do list and lift off into a world of ideas.

I was gliding at 5,000 feet of thought when I was caught in an intellectual up-draught: a quote by Henry Adams ... “They know enough who know how to learn.”

Learning how to learn, I thought, is a survival tool for individuals, teams, and organizations. I wanted to get swept up with Peter Senge and others about learning organizations, how to create them, and ... and then I wondered why. Why do some not learn?

Perhaps it is because they understand everything too soon. Recent experience blinds them; early success stops further questions; initial prosperity curbs thought.

At LIVE Consultants we help individuals, teams, and organizations learn how to learn and to stay open to the realities and possibilities that face them.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

I don't think there is a parent who hasn't told their children to tell the truth. We do this as if truth were easy to understand and as easy to discern as black is from white. It might be that clear when you are a child. The experience of adulthood makes the challenge of telling the truth more complex and indeed more challenging. It is at this point that we understand that truth is more than telling facts and that knowledge redefines what truth is.

In this article, Stephen challenges three truths about learning and discovers that they may have been *half-truths*: true in part but not in whole. As well, he notes some of the implications of the half-truths for facilitators, coaches, and managers.

Stephen Baetz is a partner of LIVE Consultants Inc., the organization sponsoring this publication.



Stephen Baetz

The Truth About Learning

About a month ago I was listening to *Finkelman's 45s* — it's a delightful, nostalgic ride back to the hits of the 50s, 60s, and 70s that happens Saturday nights on CBC. Danny plays it all from old time rock'n' roll to the British invasion, from doo-wop to classic Motown. And in-between it all, Danny pontificates about, well ... everything. He thinks that apprenticeship programs should replace universities, that political correctness has gone too far, that a pencil and a pink pearl in the right hands can out perform most technology. Yes, Danny is a character ... like an eccentric uncle who on the one hand nobody takes literally but on the other hand is taken somewhat seriously because you realize that often a grain of truth is hiding in his random reflections.

Danny has a *friend* — Father Guido Sarducci — who shares Danny's off-the-wall cynical wit. Father Guido holds the belief that most of what you learned in university can be summarized in five minutes. For sure, recent grads may find it difficult to embrace that notion having just invested four years of their lives in the pursuit of knowledge. But five years after graduation, the intellectual dust has settled, and who knows? We might agree that Father G is right ... or more right than we may wish to admit to. The knowledge residue may only be five minutes thick.

So I thought I would pick up the gauntlet and see what was left not five years later but 20 plus years after grad school. The task is more difficult than you may think. It's hard to pinpoint what you learned in school and what you learned in life ... which, in itself, may be a good thing.

As I was preparing my list something happened to me: I became acutely aware that I could recall a few odd details — some intellectual trash, minutia, Claven curiosities — the stuff you surprise yourself with when you play *Trivial Pursuit*. None of that really added up to much. However, what mattered were the insights I could recall about learning. These were ideas that I had adopted as truths and then I had left them untouched and unchallenged as truth often is. I thought it best

to test ... to see if any of what I labelled as truth could stand the test of time.

I discovered that the truths I had about learning ... that I had embraced with little questioning ... were all *half-truths*. They were half right and, by extrapolation, half wrong. Yes, they were right as far as they went but often they didn't go far enough and I wanted to add a qualification, a but, a however, a wait-just-a-minute comment.

So, in an effort to continue the challenge I faced, I offer my list of three half-truths about learning — and encourage you to add to the reflection.

Half-Truth #1: Learning requires a supportive environment.

My assumption has been that learning is most likely to happen when the teacher, seminar leader, facilitator, whomever, is supportive and encouraging. It is with this individual that ideas can be tested without fear of ridicule and new behaviours can be tried without pressure to do it perfectly the first time. Supportive educators can inspire confidence that results in a learner leaving willingly what they currently know to attempt something they have never done before.

True?

As far as it goes. But it's not the whole truth. Learning does happen when there isn't a supportive person in sight.

Recently I've started asking people to identify *turnpoints* — moments in time where they had insights that changed how they behaved, how they thought, or how they related to their world. Most of the time when those turnpoints are described they are tough, abrasive, testy, uncompromising, even hostile situations which caused the individual to rethink, dig deep, and try different ways. Often they will describe having to make an uncomfortable choice or forcing themselves to try an untravelled path or taking a risk they would have thought previously impossible. Life without a safety net. There are, in the turnpoints, few descriptions of supportive individuals who took their hand

every step of the way and guided them gently to a new place.

Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not arguing that we develop educators who are insensitive drill sergeants. Far from it. However, as educators and coaches, we need to be willing to push people to some uncomfortable places ... we need to live with their anxiety and fret when they tell us how uncomfortable it feels ... we need to resist the temptation to rescue them.

And yes, as much as we are willing to do that with others, we ought to do it with ourselves. We have to put ourselves where it is risky, uncomfortable, awkward ... so we can learn.

Half-truth #2: Learners know best what they need to learn.

Adult learners have experiences that help them understand what they need to learn. They have little time to get sidetracked on the unimportant or the trivial so they will go to those learning experiences which have the maximum personal benefit.

True?

Yes and no. Yes ... many learners, especially adult learners, know what they don't know and go after the attitudes, skills, and knowledge they require with pinpoint accuracy. They waste little time on stuff that isn't important, practical, or useful. And no ... there are as many adult learners who don't have a clue about what they need to learn.

Some wander from program to workshop like intellectual yard-sale junkies who can't kick the habit of buying stuff that is broken and storing it in the attic of their minds for the day they just might need it. Others are so immersed in what they are doing that they can't see what is coming at them. Still others run away from what they need the most because they don't want to put out the energy it takes to learn.

The implication? There are times when an educator or coach has to invest huge amounts of effort in creating learner awareness — helping the learner recognize that they have blind spots that could diminish effectiveness —

before even beginning anything that looks like a learning process.

Half-truth #3: Learning is easy and natural.

There is a basic instinct that we have to figure out how to cope with the problems and challenges around us. We assess, we anticipate, we experiment, we reflect, and we try again. We've done that, some would argue, from day one on. It's a natural instinct to adapt to our environments, solve problems, and learn new skills.

True?

In part. We do want to solve problems and find better ways. However, there are some things about learning that are neither natural nor easy. For example, when I'm learning I have to be willing to give up methods and processes that I have become skilled at ... and that isn't easy. I have to agree that others may have a better way ... and that isn't easy. I have to find time to learn while at the same time carrying my regular responsibilities ... and that isn't easy. I have to experiment and skin my shins ... and that isn't easy. Learning often isn't easy nor is it comfortable.

With Still A Few Minutes Left

I did learn that analysis was worth it if it resulted in conclusions. So what are the implications of the half-truths for educators and coaches?

- Remind yourself that people are going to be uncomfortable when they are learning ... and that discomfort is okay, even helpful.
- Push people to question their current knowledge, behaviour, and attitudes and then help them to see what they don't know but need to know.
- Recognize that learners may want you to make some learning easy but to do that would be to rob them of the victory and limit the chances that they will own what they've learned.

Was that five minutes?

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