

Learning A New Skill is Easier Said Than Done

By Linda Adams ~ President, Gordon Training International

Before rolling out specific training or initiatives that are aimed at improving some facet of your business, you need to ensure that your leaders and team members are equipped with fundamental communication and relationship management skills.

Numerous studies have verified that cooperation, communication, interpersonal skills, listening and summarizing skills are critical to higher-order team success. In their book, *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner write, "Every leader ought to know how to paraphrase, summarize, express feelings, disclose personal information, admit mistakes, respond non-defensively, ask for clarification, solicit different views, and so on."

These skills are at the heart of emotional intelligence. Cultivating them in managers and employees is the key to all of the benefits of training and development. An organization that is already able to communicate across levels productively and functionally, and to manage conflicts creatively and beneficially, is prepared for higher-order training and learning that will require those skills for successful implementation.

The Four Stages for Learning Any New Skill

No matter what new skill we decide to learn, there are four learning stages* each of us goes through. Being aware of these stages helps us better accept that learning can be a slow and frequently uncomfortable process.

Stage 1 — Unconsciously unskilled. We don't know what we don't know. We are inept and unaware of it.

Using a recent personal example, last year after seeing the great shape a friend was in and learning that it was a result of Pilates exercise, I decided to try it out for myself. The first time I went to a class, I felt self-conscious and awkward. I knew nothing about how Pilates worked and I had never seen, much less used, any of those machines before.

Applying this principle to communication training at work, often leaders communicate in ways that interfere with or damage relationships with their team members, but they aren't aware of it.

Stage 2 — Consciously unskilled. We know what we don't know. We start to learn at this level when sudden awareness of how poorly we do something shows us how much we need to learn.

I have exercised for many years so I thought I was already pretty fit and strong. Wrong. After two or three Pilates classes, I was struck by how few of the movements I could do well. The instructor did a lot of observing and correcting. I also observed the ease with which she and other students did more advanced movements (and learned how long they've been doing it!).

While participating in a Leader Effectiveness Training course, leaders become aware of both ineffective and effective ways of communicating. They become conscious of the way most of us usually respond when team members signal they have a problem and the negative effects these "Roadblocks" have on the working relationship. And they become aware of the power of empathic listening. They also learn about the importance of clear and direct self-disclosure as an alternative to passive or aggressive communication. But at this stage, they aren't yet using these skills. They might feel some guilt as they realize the effects their previous communication might have had on their team members.

Stage 3 — Consciously skilled. Trying the skill out, experimenting, practicing. We now know how to do the skill the right way, but need to think and work hard to do it.

At this stage of learning communication skills, leaders are very conscious of using them. They try hard to avoid unhelpful or damaging responses and to listen empathically instead. This means they bite their tongue a lot! And they are very aware of trying to speak in clear, authentic, non-blameful language when expressing their opinions, needs and problems. When conflicts arise, their goal is to try to find a solution that works for both people. Sometimes, they might feel a little phony or the use of skills seems kind of gimmicky. Other people usually perceive the leader as consciously trying to communicate differently.

Stage 4 — Unconsciously skilled. If we continue to practice and apply the new skills, eventually we arrive at a stage where they become easier, and given time, even natural.

Now, nine months later, after going to Pilates twice each week, I can do many more moves and no longer feel so awkward. I look forward to going to the classes; they're energizing, challenging and rewarding, and no longer scary. I've gotten stronger and more fit and other people notice the difference, too! Still, I see how far I have to go.

When leaders persist in using the skills they start to be comfortable with them. Now active listening, congruent self-disclosure and no-lose conflict resolution seem more natural. Team members and others respond favorably because they feel heard, understood, appreciated, satisfied. Leaders find that they can apply these skills in all areas of their lives and gradually they become integrated into all of their interactions and become the natural way of being with others.

**This Learning Stages model was developed by former GTI employee, Noel Burch over 30 years ago.*
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