When We Have to Learn By Unlearning

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Anupa Naik, M.Ed.

CEO at SmartWork! Inc.

Many moons ago, I was a wee youngster just starting out in my career. That first job was in an industry where it was normal to have an antagonistic and even confrontational relationship with customers. It was an old school, and fairly old boys' culture; and that's how business got done. Ok, I got it.

In my next job, I began criticizing our customers to my peers – as I had been used to doing. I was promptly delivered a blunt message from my manager:

"We treat our customers with great respect here," he said. "We don't speak about *them, or* to *them in the way that I heard you speaking. That's not who we are. So, you need to decide if you fit in here."*

OUCH. But I was always a strong performer, and I thought I was doing very well at my job, leveraging my previous experience. So, what just happened? And, like being smacked in the head with a brick, I got it.

That single conversation profoundly transformed me, and taught me to consider a dimension of learning and development that we don't often talk about. We all form habits and behaviors based on previous experiences, and bring them to our jobs. What if these experiences are inhibiting us from being successful on the job?

When it comes to changing and adopting behaviors, sometimes the most effective practice is not learning them, but *unlearning* them. Sometimes, we can only adopt new, successful behaviors by letting go of our existing, inhibitive ones.

Whether creating training programs, having developmental conversations, or reflecting on your own development, these five points can help unlearn counterproductive behaviors:

1. Gather information about your environment when you start in a new job, company or team, or when you want to improve your own performance.

- Honestly assess the values, habits, behaviors and traits that have made you successful and unsuccessful in previous roles.
- Observe your manager, team or organization.
- Compare or contrast the environmental values, habits, behaviors and traits to yours.
- Ask others what makes them successful, or what they initially struggled with, and what success looks like in your role/company.

2. Recognize, acknowledge and accept cultural, philosophical, procedural, or behavioral differences and norms in the organizational culture. These factors are extremely powerful in shaping the way we work, and how we succeed and thrive.

- Ask yourself if the values, beliefs, behaviors and practices around you are currently aligned with your own. If they are not, think about the potential benefits to being more aligned.
- Identify your own habits and behaviors that are incompatible with your environment, and consider if changing them will help you.
- Think about opportunities to grow, and learn; and demonstrate untapped knowledge, skills or behaviors under new circumstances.

3. Make a conscious choice to change a habit, behavior or mindset and adapt when necessary. Change is difficult for everyone, and it can be positive and even exciting, if we use it as another tool to develop and grow.

- Identify the specific habit or behavior you want to change.

- Imagine how you will do things differently and then start doing them differently.
- Create a plan with milestones, and think about your successes and outcomes.
- Let go of the old ways, and embrace the new ones.

4. Incorporate behavioral change and unlearning into talent and performance development practices.

- Include opportunities to unlearn habits and behaviors during onboarding.
- Hold successful development discussions by constructively comparing successful habits and behaviors. Try to recognize the employee's need to unlearn something, and help them to recognize it.
- Ensure that employees feel safe and encouraged as they work on the need to shed old behaviors and adopt new ones.
- Communicate to employees about the behaviors and traits that make them successful in your organization, and unique in your industry.

Remember that employees who are new to an organization, team, or role, will need time and opportunity to unlearn some habits and behaviors, before replacing them with successful ones. Learning and behavior change are complex processes that are capable of evolving over time, to weave the rich fabric of your career.