

Western Banker Magazine: HR & Training Digest

Issue #22 – November 2013

Unlearn to Change*By Scott E. Byorum, Nationwide Real Estate Tax Service, Inc.**“Still, a man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.” ~ The Boxer by Paul Simon*

When I was employed at a thin-film coating manufacturing plant, one of the departments I worked in was split into two product lines and located in two separate buildings. Both departments worked in similar “clean” tents, used the same type of coating machine, the same scanners, the same coating gases and metals and similar glass substrates. Yet the end product’s application of each manufacturing line was vastly different.

One night I was in charge of training an operator how to run one of the product lines. He was from the other product line and already knew how to operate the coating machine, clean glass and scan product parameters. As I was showing him the operational details of the new product line, he kept saying “On the other coating machine we do this,” or “On the other product line we do this.” He kept deviating from procedure and making errors.

Finally, I looked him in the eyes and said, “You aren’t on the other product line anymore.”

In 1601, James Lancaster, an English sea captain, discovered an effective method for eliminating deaths from scurvy during oversea travels by giving sailors on one of his ships regular doses of lemon juice. During travel, none of the sailors taking lemon juice died, while 40 percent of sailors on other ships did. The citric acid in fruit eliminated scurvy.

Despite repeated successful tests and documentation that proved regular fruit consumption eliminated scurvy it took nearly two centuries before the British Navy adopted the protocol. Why? There were a variety of factors involved, but one of them had to do with officers and sailors alike having different ideas on what caused and cured scurvy, despite overwhelming evidence.

We hold on to our knowledge, to our ideas. We are introduced to facts and logic and viewpoints that make sense of how to do certain things and how the world works. They combine and meld and form who we are. It helps us adapt and survive and gives us direction. And yet, a good portion of what we adopt into our minds becomes irrelevant, or can be explained by another process or perspective, or is just plain wrong. Why?

For one, the title to this article is a misnomer. Our personal experiences and our interpretation of facts are interwoven like fabric. We never actually unlearn anything (outside of disease or trauma to the brain occurring). We may forget it for a time or misplace it, but like the fabric, everything gets interwoven into our narrative. It’s a survival tool. By comparing and contrasting similarities and differences, we are able to navigate a course for ourselves through life.

Whether that course is rational or not, positive or not, destructive or not...efficient or not...well, that entirely depends on the tools we employ to manage change. There is a definite, *efficient* approach to learning something new. So how does one “Unlearn to Change?” This is where a healthy dose of individual responsibility comes in to play.

Learn what makes it different. Start at the beginning. Canoeing isn't kayaking. Throwing a baseball isn't the same as throwing a football. The similarities are obvious, but the differences are subtle. You won't be able to use canoe strokes effectively in kayaking and you won't be able to throw a football like a baseball. Set aside what you think you know from noticing the similarities and focus on what you don't know by learning the differences.

Examine what you know. Stay open. It is difficult to act outside your beliefs for long because beliefs house the emotions that determine our behavior. This is glaringly obvious in the political system. When one believes that they are right, then everything that disagrees with that assessment seems obviously wrong. This is a fallacy. There are different ways to pick up a ball. The only time any change effort worked successfully was when people challenged their own beliefs and sought out another way.

Ask for feedback. We look to others to evaluate the effectiveness of our decisions, actions and behaviors. Most people do not want to appear naïve, uncertain or in the dark about their responsibilities and what is expected of them. Seek people who are open, honest and consistent to serve as a mirror in your evaluation of how you are managing change. They will help steer you away from errors and help you navigate towards success.

How new processes, experiences and knowledge are introduced to you is as equally important as your approach in making sense of it. Employing a simple set of tools like the aforementioned can make the process more efficient and more enjoyable.

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