

## Experiencing Incompetence

While reading through my daily newsletters and blog posts, I ran across an interesting statement in an article from Seth Godin...Learning is the difficult work of experiencing incompetence on our way to mastery.

I see myself as a self-starter, a curious person, a leader willing to take on difficult work, but, I'm not drawn to the idea of experiencing incompetence.

I like the idea of achieving mastery of a skill or knowledgebase, but, I don't like the idea that I would be experiencing incompetence along the way.

### Comfort Zones

Wouldn't it be great if every skill could be learned in one lesson and applied successfully on the first attempt? Unfortunately, that's not the way life works. Experiencing incompetence is part of learning. It clarifies quickly what still needs to be developed or improved.

I enjoy successful outcomes. I don't like being wrong. I enjoy independence. I don't like admitting I need help. I enjoy feeling comfortable. I don't like the uncomfortable feeling that goes with doing things incorrectly. So, let's start with those observations on our way to mastery.

Identifying what makes us uncomfortable is a wonderful foundation for our development plans. Think about it. If you only repeat your competencies, and stay in your comfort zone, you have placed learning limits on what you are capable of achieving. Achievements that occur when we are willing to experience incompetence.

Achievements that, when evaluated, provide insights regarding our strengths and weaknesses.

If you are a leader that needs a predictable result with every effort you will limit your personal, professional and organizational success. Predictable results cannot be guaranteed when you are introducing changes or new procedures. The results can be managed, but not guaranteed.

In most organizations, there are too many interdependent activities to produce a perfect result during a first attempt. Even so, in some organizations, perfection is the expectation. Get it right the first time. No exceptions. That's a difficult expectation to achieve.

Here is the problem with that philosophy. As the complexity of the new endeavor increases, so does the chance that someone will execute it incorrectly. It is not a bad condition, it just isn't the desired condition. Managers, therefore, need to set realistic performance expectations during education and training efforts.

### Challenge Yourself

Here's where managers need to step up their game. Employee orientations and company procedure manuals are inadequate training resources. Employees need more than information. Their journey to mastering skills will include the difficult work of applying what they know and experiencing incompetence.

We cannot avoid incompetence when we begin learning a new skill. And, the complexity of the skill will impact the time it takes for us to build competence. Coaches and mentors need

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to remember this fact and organize their management activities to help employees grow and prosper through their attempts at learning a new skill. Hands-on and in-person. No exceptions.

Think of education as a lifetime of learning. It applies a clear timeline to your development plan. It's not just during school. It's not just during the early years of your career. It's a lifetime of important experiences. Begin by evaluating where you have achieved competence on your way to mastery. What do you do really well, consistently, all the time? Those skills give you an important context to coach the same skills with others.

What do you still need to add to your arsenal of skills? Those skills must become part of your development plan before you integrate them into mentoring activities.

Some managers make the mistake of assuming that simple tasks are easy to learn, and therefore, they are intuitive to employees. Not true. If you want customers to receive a consistent experience throughout your organization, coaches must take time to identify the performance expectations, coach the appropriate behavior and assess the employee's performance. Even the small details and simple tasks matter.

There are no shortcuts to optimal performance. Everything matters when serving customers and other employees, and mastery is the ultimate goal. The number of employees that experience long periods of incompetence will increase if managers fail to provide adequate instruction.

The development of complex skills seems like the appropriate time for employees' attempts to fall short of the desired performance. Afterall, it's a complex activity. Knowing this, coaches need to develop mentoring techniques that support learning, not just teaching. Teaching shares information, but learning will lead to understanding. Employees with a clear understanding of desired outcomes are more likely to develop into independent problem solvers as they hone their skills.

### **Invite Others To Grow With You**

Take the simple exercise of identifying what makes you uncomfortable and ask the employees you manage to do the same. Add a question to identify what they love most about their job responsibilities and you will have a preliminary list of competencies, known skills and development opportunities ready for further discussion. Use your insights to identify where learning will be necessary if the employee is going to reach mastery. Then actively coach that employee, frequently, hands-on, in-person, no exceptions.

What makes you uncomfortable while completing your primary job responsibilities?

What do you love most about your job responsibilities?

What skills would you like to master in the next 12 months?

If you need assistance with staff development, we have industry specific resources ready for implementation.

