

Why Your Expert is Your Worst Trainer

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As a plant and division manager, as a worker and as a technician, I have always been intrigued by episodes of training that worked, or that failed spectacularly. My greatest disappointments were when the best expert was unable to elicit even rudimentary understanding from a novice assigned to him, while an operator just a few weeks on the job was able to get a similar novice operating competently in very short order.

I have identified a couple of factors that seem to explain the failure of the expert trainer and what makes the newly competent employee the better one to train a new person.

Novice Work. Most of us think that the novice's job is to understand the job. This is incorrect and the first error of our training adventure. A novice's job is to learn how to learn.

The expert's learning how to learn happened decades ago in Internet time or in dog years. The expert does not share the novice's lack of understanding, and is frustrated at the novice's inability to even recognize the basic situations that are part of the job.

The novice has more than he or she can handle just trying to learn the critical features and vocabulary of the job. Recognizing situations and conditions isn't even in the cards for the novice at this stage of the training. Just safely



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learning the “names of things” and “how to do” is the novice's immediate challenge.

Familiarity Leads to Competence. As the novice gets time on task, repetition leads to familiarity, which leads to competence. Repeated experience coping with the situations on the job starts to lead the novice to understand the role of context in the job.

Employees who are already at this stage are really the best trainers, as they are able to identify with the novice's lack of “clues” as to when or why something is to be done.

Having just learned this context and having just triumphed over the struggles faced as a novice, the newly competent

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performer is the one person in your shop that is best able to communicate with the “new hand.”

Experts Aren't on the Same Page. While the novice struggles to learn the basics and the situations faced on the job, the newly competent looks for context and applies the principles or rules already learned that are triggered by those clues. How different for the expert, who looks at the situation holistically and, seemingly, without following any defined process, then intuitively arrives at the correct answer, solution or decision.

When asked why or how he came up with that, the expert shrugs, thinks for a minute and typically responds, “Because.” Or, “I just knew.” This is because the expert has internalized

“Empower those in your shop who have just mastered a skill to reach back and share what they have learned with those who are following.”

the steps, lessons, causes and effects and has built them into a “way of knowing” that is a unique, experience-based construct employed without any conscious effort.

How effective can an intuitive be at explaining steps of a process to a novice who desperately needs those steps to be spelled out when the expert isn't even aware of his own mode of thinking? The

expert actually needs to downshift his thinking to an earlier mode of mere competence or proficiency if he is going to be able to communicate the issues in a clear manner.

Bottom Line: Highest and Best Use for People. The bottom line for those of us tasked with training and skills development is contrary to the idea that we should have our experts training our novices. To do so is to doom all parties to frustration, anger and likely failure.

Experts operate on internalized intuition that is based on situational context. Novices are not yet capable of recognizing the different situations or contexts, and may not yet even have a name for them.

The ability to communicate with experts is severely limited, and just listening to the dictates of an expert is no substitute for critical thinking. It is not learning. Let the experts operate at their highest and best use and get them out of the day-to-day training where they are just confusing and angering the trainees and their supervisors.

Instead, empower those in your shop who have just mastered a skill to reach back and share what they have learned with those who are following in their footsteps. They have more in common with their charges.

The recency of their experience and the lessons learned assures that what they share will be relevant and appropriate in the current environment. Plus, the act of teaching strengthens their grasp on the material even more as they explain and demonstrate it successfully to others.

I am all for experts. As a matter of fact, I am also for novices and for those newly competent. We need a pipeline of skills and experience if we are to keep precision manufacturing a strength in our culture.

In the event that I become a novice, I pray that I am trained by a recent competent, rather than a wise, old expert. I want my trainer to be someone who recently struggled the same struggle. I want someone who has been puzzled by the same mysteries, and who found—and can show me—the way to get to success.

It's a matter of communication and shared reality. Someday, we may get to the level of understanding of that expert. But until then, an expert's knowledge is no different than magic to those of us without that experience.

An expert—just like a magician—makes a lousy teacher. But an expert is great to have around when you need to pull a rabbit out of a hat.

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Through the meetings, resources and online connections, reports and more, we give you the tools to grow. We look at emerging markets and let you know what's hot and what's not. PMPA programs help you understand your markets so you can make sense of the issues. And, we provide relevant information to help you make informed decisions.