

Levelling the Learning Field

Marshall Goldsmith - 2/11/14

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"Siamese twins!" whispered the silver-headed, elegantly dressed woman to her friend seated beside her. "They dance like two people who are one." Her colleague nodded with enthusiastic agreement as they watched the two dancers merge, spin, disengage and re-emerge in a human blend as harmonious as light with shadow. "They are magic in motion," the friend whispered back.

Mentoring at its best is a partnership like two dancers perfectly in sync. Partnership learning positions both parties — mentor and protégé — on a journey of discovery. As the mentor embraces a curious, egalitarian stance, the protégé senses safety and joins in the journey.

The more the mentor seeks to learn (rather than just teach), the more the protégé feels affirmed and less alone. Mentoring is a dance of sorts to reach the heights of a pure partnership. And it all begins with surrendering to the learning process.

Partnerships are hopeful pursuits of magic, not efforts valued only at completion. Some otherwise successful partnerships are susceptible to what I will label the "perfection trap." Focus on flawlessness is a dead-end path. The by-product of this right/wrong, good/bad thinking is the seed of win/lose paradigms that fuel competitive relationships.

Partnerships impeccably performed look like magic in motion. The relationship is a living demonstration of wild-river efficiency mixed with barnyard harmony. To the participants in the midst of the collaborative current, the flow feels like a spiritual surprise.

The workings of partnerships, however, are far from magical. Like magicians, partnerships present an orchestrated demonstration of proficiencies and disposition. Both skill and attitude must work in harmony for a winning performance. A technically accurate magician with no showmanship or flair would be no more successful than a bumbling sleight-of-hand act with personality.

How does this high-octane learning occur? What action does the mentor need to take to encourage this synergistic moment? In a word, surrender. The first step is to surrender to the process.

Surrendering means relinquishing any effort to control or manipulate the outcome. It means putting all effort into being authentic, real and mask-free. It means being devoted to learning, not dedicated to convincing.

As management consultant Bruce Fritch said, "Surrendering is the most difficult and most courageous interpersonal act a leader can take with a subordinate. It is also the most powerful!"

Mentors surrender in several ways. One of these could be called "mask removal" — the willingness to be open and vulnerable. We all wear masks, in part to protect ourselves against rejection.

When a mentor removes this mask in front of the protégé, it changes the nature of the relationship from cautious to unguarded. Energy normally devoted to cover and protection becomes available for insight and discovery.

A gifted consulting psychologist taught a series of executive workshops on performance coaching. The final advice he gave attendees was to practice their newfound skills on a couple of subordinates: "Start your practice by telling your associates something like the following: 'I have just attended a workshop on performance coaching and learned some new skills I want to use in our relationship. I will be very awkward at first and make a lot of mistakes, but with some practice and your patience, I will get better, and we will both benefit.'"

The advice was a valuable relationship builder. Attendees at follow-up sessions reported enormous success. The authenticity caused subordinates to see their leaders in a new light. Many reported that their sessions turned out to be the most powerful and productive conversation they had ever had. The typical executive report went something like this: "When I gave up trying to force it to work, it seemed to take on a life of its own and steered the relationship where it needed to go." This magical quality of mentoring begins with surrendering.

Surrendering is fundamentally about being assertively honest and candid, with the intention of helping, not hurting, the other person. There is a cleanness and frankness about relationships in which authenticity is valued. Great mentors care enough to be honest and forthright; they are also curious and learning-oriented enough to invite and accept candour from the protégé.

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