
Sex and Chicken

THE ROLE OF NONCONSCIOUS LEARNING—
AND HOW TO HELP ADULTS DO IT

Occasionally, I am asked by large corporations to look into their training issues. These assignments can be great fun or downright boring. Companies tend to have similar problems in training, so often I find myself saying the same thing that I said in my last engagement. It is not often that I find myself saying the same thing to a training company and to a friend, however, but this happened in the course of a very odd week recently.

The experience was odd because neither the company nor the friend was what you would call “normal.” The company grosses a billion dollars a year from the fast food business. My friend doesn’t gross quite that much. I don’t know what he earns after all, but believe me, his numbers aren’t that far off.

So they are both doing very well, thank you very much. Where they differ is in, shall we say, moral rectitude. The company seems to employ only people who wear white shirts and

ties and pray a lot. Family values are mentioned quite frequently. Somehow selling chicken is seen as doing God's work.

My friend, on the other hand, lives the kind of life that many men fantasize about, and, shall we say, moral rectitude doesn't come up much. Neither does family, since my friend has never been married, but it came up when I saw him because he has decided, now that he had passed fifty, to have a child. He has no intention of getting married, however.

What does any of this have to do with training?

At first glance not much.

The meeting at the fast food company was, as I said, quite typical. Companies often believe that their training is just fine thank you, and when I have been called in they are often not quite sure why (even though they are the ones who called.) They know I build cool simulations and other training stuff, and they want to see it, is of course one reason, I suppose. They often do lots of stand up in class training and they sometimes view this like cigarette smoking, a bad habit that feels so good. So they are willing to let me explain why they shouldn't smoke, but they usually keep on smoking—too many vested interests. They have built all those classrooms and all that infrastructure after all. But deeper and often hidden are the real reasons they have called me.

"What doesn't work in the training you do now?" I ask.

"Nothing. It all works fine," they respond. They built that training after all. It must be great.

"Well then," I say, "let me ask you a different question: What goes wrong in your restaurants?"

This question usually works. Unfortunately, since I have consulted with restaurant chains before, I already know the type of answer I'll hear. "Politeness," they say. Or courtesy or rude-

ness, or how to deal with difficult customers or how to handle difficult situations in the restaurant. These are always the answers.

SO WHAT'S THE TRAINING DEPARTMENT TO DO?

I have an answer on how to deal with this of course, but before I talk about that answer I want to go back to my friend.

My friend had decided to have a child but he had no intention of getting married or living with his "family." He was scheming on how best to do this and was asking me all kinds of questions since I know a lot about child development and, of course, about education. I asked him, "Why only one?" He has a great many women in his life and more money than he could ever spend, so why not more? He got his arms around this idea and the questions started flying.

- Who will decide what school the kid goes to?
- Who is in charge of health decisions?
- Where should the mother and child live?

What school the kid goes to wasn't a real issue, I told him. Parents tend not to fight about such things unless there are religious issues involved. I suggested he make sure there weren't. Similarly, unless one of the women was a Christian Scientist, I doubted health decisions would be a real problem. He has four houses. I suggested that the women and children could live in any or all of them and he could visit as he wanted, the way he does now.

"Could the women have men in their lives?" he asked. At first this took me by surprise, but I guess he figured he'd lose interest, as he always had done before (which is, I suppose why

he wasn't getting married and why we were having all this discussion in the first place).

"No," I said immediately, and he asked why.

The problem when you are trying to invent the rules of life for yourself instead of simply copying what others have done is that you can assume that people throughout history have tried many different ways to live and that the ones we have had handed down to us may well be the best. When you invent your own rules, you are forced to examine first principles again and again, asking questions that most people never have to ask.

Such a reasonable question with such a complex answer. I decided to tell him about my daughter, Hana, when she was about one and a half. We were living in Switzerland at the time. Hana was my parents' first grandchild and they were in New York, so there were frequent phone calls back and forth and more than the occasional visit. Once during this period I got curious as to whether Hana knew the names of her grandparents. I figured she might not know the word "name" so I asked her "What does Gammy (her name for my mother) call Poppy (my father)?" She immediately responded "Maaacc!!" imitating the intonation and exasperation of my mother trying to get my father's attention. I asked what my father called my mother and she said "Marge!" in a tone of an authoritative military call.

One more example: One day I noticed Hana walking in furious circles while she was talking on the phone to my parents, at one point almost bringing the phone down on her head. Now who had been teaching her that? Well . . . me. That's what I do when I talk on the phone. And it is still what my daughter does, thirty years later.

I told my friend these stories because the moral is pretty clear. *Children don't know what the critical things to attend to are*

in the information they receive, so they attend to all of it. Hana was a kind of tape recorder: She attended to everything and copied as much as she could. Like a duck following the first thing that moves after it is born, thus imprinting a football as its mother if it happens to roll by, a child attends to what is around her.

Now if there is another man in the life of my friend's child, who is to tell the child that what that man does isn't worth copying just because he is not paying the bills and is not genetically related? No child cares about anything at that age besides figuring out how the world works. Whoever is in the child's world teaches that child how to behave, whether you like it or not. I figured my friend might not like the new male teacher that mommy brought home.

Another man in the house brings someone new to copy. He might be someone real good to copy, who knows? But he won't be my friend. Little by little, my friend's children would be his only genetically if he wasn't careful.

Now what does this have to do with training in the fast food company that called me in for a consult?

Everything.

People are pretty well formed by the time they are only half-way through their childhood. All their little habits, attitudes, and general ways of being are formed real early on.

**SO HOW DO YOU GET EMPLOYEES
NOT TO BE RUDE TO CUSTOMERS OR LEARN
HOW TO HANDLE DIFFICULTIES WITH APLOMB?**

You teach them when they are four or five years old. Those behaviors are imprinted early on by watching mom or dad—or whoever is on the scene most of the time. The problem is that some businesses, like fast food restaurants, are not necessarily

getting the cream of society for \$6 an hour. These workers didn't necessarily have great role models who taught them how to cope when the going gets tough.

So there are only two answers to this problem.

Answer #1. Hire the Right People

This is the first, and best, answer. Check up on their families. Make sure they treat those they know with civility and they may well do so at the restaurant as well.

While this may seem like obvious advice, it is rarely followed. The company I was consulting for does do this. They spend a great deal of time in the hiring process and try very hard to get the right sort of folks. What goes wrong there then?

That is easy to guess at. Unless you put someone in a situation, you never really know how he or she will respond. You can ask anything you like, and he can learn to say what you want to hear, but imprinting is a nonconscious process. *It is the nonconscious processes that matter most.*

What is a nonconscious process? James Galwey describes this best in the Inner Game of Tennis. He says that when you are trying to remember to keep your elbow straight because you were told that would help you hit the ball right, you find yourself telling yourself or reminding yourself to do that. "Who is talking to whom exactly?" Galwey asks.

The idea that there is an inner self who is in charge who can be reasoned with is ubiquitous in our everyday behavior. But does this make sense? If we can tell our inner self what to do, what is preventing our inner selves from listening? The answer is that you can't really talk to the nonconscious self. Hana can catch herself walking in circles while talking on the phone and she can stop the

behavior, but when she isn't paying attention her nonconscious self starts walking.

The nonconscious self wins every time when it is left to its own devices.

And how do we educate people in nonconscious processes? How do we get the employee to change her natural instinct to throttle a customer who annoys her? This leads us to the second answer.

Answer #2. Practice

Get them to deal with crises on a regular basis and they will get better at handling them. This is best done in simulation, of course, the more realistic the better. So what does this mean in reality? It means that in order to imprint a new set of nonconscious behaviors one has to bring up the new behaviors in the same way that one would bring them up in a child. To put this another way, you can't just talk about them.

To imprint new nonconscious behaviors, you have to bring them up the same way you would in a child—you can't just talk about them.

Companies love to set up lists of rules, or values, or principles, that all employees must learn to mouth. The value of this is zip, nothing, worthless. The reason is simple: you are talking to the wrong self. The inner self, the nonconscious self, the imprinting child, is simply not listening. To reach that self one has to go back to the methods that imprint behavior in the first place.

WHAT ALL THIS MEANS IS . . .

Starting simply and using a reward system that is very simple. Remember that children learn behaviors by watching others. But if you think that that means that you should show videotapes of good behavior, you are thinking wrong. Yet again, you would be talking to the wrong self. Instead, you need to strictly enforce punishment for bad behavior in front of future actors. Let me explain.

It may seem that people skills are easy and other skills are difficult, so it is tempting to hire a hostess or a cashier who has had little training. In fact, these skills are the hardest. In a restaurant, where those skills are most valued, one should have to work one's way up to such positions. In other words, have people fry French fries before they ever come into contact with a customer. Let them observe good customer contact behavior, however, while they are working at the fry station. And let them also observe bad behavior dealt with swiftly—which would eliminate it from something that could be copied because the new employee would see what happened when such behavior occurred and would nonconsciously be averse to trying to behave that way. Actions speak louder than words, as we know.

Bad behavior dealt with swiftly eliminates it as something that can be copied.

This is not all that can be done, of course. The value of the computer in training is to replicate realistic situations that can be played out without risk of failure. The air flight simulator is a much better way to learn how to fly a plane than just taking off in one. Crashes don't hurt in simulation.

So should restaurants build and use restaurant simulators? It is really hard to believe that they don't. Practice, practice, practice. *If you want people to exhibit certain behaviors, they need a chance to practice those behaviors again and again.* How costly would it be to build an elaborate simulator of a restaurant where every role in the restaurant was played out and a new employee needed to interact well in the simulation, where nightmarish circumstances tested his mettle, before going into that role in the real restaurant? It is cheaper in the long run to build such a simulator than to deal with the fallout over lost customers who complain that they are being treated rudely.

The point: we need to start the imprinting process again. People continue to learn throughout life, adopting new role models as adults and practicing new behaviors. But they rarely learn by being told. They learn by watching and by doing. If the senior people in the restaurant are really courteous both to employees and to customers, it might well rub off.

Nonconscious teaching is the deepest. The duck didn't decide to follow the football and my daughter didn't decide to walk in circles.



JUMP START YOUR THINKING

SOME DO'S AND DON'TS

- Do wonder what is not working in your company.
- Do use mistakes made every day at your company as the bases of the training courses you decide to build.
- Do examine why the processes that are executed at your company are in place.

- Don't try to teach what should have been taught when the employee was five years old.
- Do realize that an employee's personality and attitudes are (for the most part) unchangeable.
- Don't try to tell employees not to do what they are naturally inclined to do.
- Do make employees practice proper behavior again and again.
- Do not confuse the conscious listener with the nonconscious actor.
- Do use simulations that allow employees to practice proper behavior repeatedly.
- Do use simulations instead of actual experience when teaching people skills.
- Do allow employees to imprint proper behavior by watching it in live action.
- Do teach the nonconscious self by constant contact with proper role models.