

A Question of Comfort

By Steven C. Coats

The notion of comfort is a bit of a puzzle these days when it comes to innovation and high performance. On one hand, you will hear how you have to move out of your so-called comfort zone in order to grow, improve and innovate. Managers seeking innovation are frequently urging their people to get outside the box, try new things, and make mistakes – all of which can easily lead to feelings of discomfort. And in spite of the reassuring, even encouraging messages of support and safety which accompany these requests, feelings of discomfort and anxiety still linger.

By the same token, another message people continue to hear is the wise-sounding, yet confounding advice, suggesting they learn how to *get more comfortable with being uncomfortable*. That implies that being comfortable has some kind of importance as well, doesn't it? Too bad clever sounding slogans, such as this one, are often so hard to put into daily practice.

So what is the deal with comfort? Are people poised to excel when in the midst of uncomfortable learning, or when working from within their comfort zones.

Comfort and Learning Zones

The Comfort Zone is the well-used expression which refers to the parts of our work or personal lives, which are familiar, stable and predictable. Here we know what we are supposed to do, and are pretty confident at doing it. For one, the comfort zone might consist of always relying on a truckload of PowerPoint slides for any

presentation. For a second, it might be only associating with or hiring people just like oneself. For yet another, it might involve continuing to write checks for purchases, instead of using a credit/debit card or smartphone.

Everyone has a comfort zone, and given the craziness of the world, it is important to have a safe harbor or two, where you feel like you still may have some control over your life.

But, growth and breakthroughs seldom or at best slowly occur when people remain too comfortable. Most of you have likely heard of the term, Growth or Learning Zone. This is the realm you move into when you move beyond what you consider to be comfortable. And this is where great learning and surprising breakthroughs most frequently occur.

Venturing into the growth zone requires you to ultimately get off the beginner's slope and take your unperfected skiing skills to a more challenging hill. You have to step up and learn to embrace new technologies, as complicated as they may seem. And you have to try ideas at work (and home) which you have never before attempted. Personal and organizational progress requires exploration and experimentation – both which can conflict with feelings of comfort and control. Bottom line – there is usually, if not always, a feeling of discomfort, when personal growth is occurring. It is the cost of improving.

The Paradox

Although everyone must experience discomfort in order to grow, we also know that when people

are at their best – when they are truly in the sweet spot – they are comfortable in their own skin, in whatever situation they find themselves. You need look no further than a star quarterback dealing with bus-size, yet surprisingly fast lineman trying to squash him, or a seasoned ER doctor, confronting a trauma she has never before encountered. Because of confidence and experience, the attacking giants slow down for the quarterback, and life-saving options suddenly start appearing for the doctor.

Personally, I am much more comfortable with and better at speaking in front of a group, than I am in repairing a faucet in a bathroom. Although I have completed that task, I second-guessed every move I made, and was anything but efficient. People perform at their best, when they act with knowledge and confidence, not when they are hesitant and insecure about what they should do.

We learn through discomfort, but we master in comfort. And perhaps that is the lesson.

Constant comfort, with no new challenges, can easily lead to complacency. Yet, a constant void in comfort can lead to anxiety or hopelessness

about ever becoming good at anything. So we must be careful about not getting too entrenched, for too long, in either side of this pesky continuum.

Top performance requires the discomfort of learning and even more discomfort in practicing. It requires floundering, coming up short and even the chance of looking foolish to others. Yet the best of the best, whether they are performing artists, musicians, teachers, businesspeople or whomever, are willing to go there. And through the pain of practice – of seemingly endless mistakes and ongoing corrections – they get better. And a discomfort of yesterday becomes a more comfortable endeavor today.

Relish those achievements in growth, and continue to frequently demonstrate those now more comfortable, higher levels of performance. Just do not park in that comfort for eternity. Continue to take yourself into new areas of the growth zone and accept the fact that learning and practice will always be awkward. But know that comfort will soon be in your grasp again, as you continue to master the newest challenge at hand.

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