

Falling Down

– The necessary stages of breakthrough learning

Cast your mind back to when you were younger and learned to drive, or master another highly complex task. Can you remember how it felt to go through that learning process that took you from total novice to proficient, or in the case of a Lewis Hamilton, highly skilled? This learning process and its implications for business has been in the front of my mind this winter, as a result of what started as a bit of fun in service of training for my 100km running race debut. But even the Lewis Hamilton's of this world don't just leap from novice to expert in one go. So how does the learning process really work?

I don't know about you, but it's been a while since I took on something that challenged my learning skills by starting something from scratch. This winter, I've been learning to cross-country ski (or Langlauf). Watching the professionals makes it look easy – arms and legs moving in perfect timing as the narrow Nordic skis glide across the icy snow. I started my Langlauf journey as an ignorant bystander with virtually no skills (**unconscious incompetence**). In this first of 4 stages of learning we simply don't know what we don't know!

But it didn't take long for me to realise just how bad I was. About 10 faltering steps in fact before I came crashing down to earth as I lost my balance on the icy track. Suddenly, that rush of enthusiasm that led a highly motivated Adrian to sign up for a Nordic ski taster session was starting to drain away as I came into contact with the icy 'thud' of falling. There was a very long way to go before I could move like Dario Cologna (the Nordic Skiing equivalent of Lewis Hamilton in Switzerland). I had reached the next learning stage – (**conscious incompetence**). This phase is where we are going to lose motivation and give up if we are not well supported and truly committed to the learning we have started.

Years ago I started to learn the saxophone and after several attempts at getting past the first few lines of 'Straight no chaser' I eventually threw in the towel.

So what was different this time? Firstly, I have been deeply committed to learning Langlauf. It was going to give me a big payback, both with my endurance for the 100km and also by improving my shocking balance and co-ordination skills (which hinder other things like trying to dance). And secondly, I had support from friends who can already ski and were encouraging me at every step.

"Many of life's failures are people who did not realise how close they were to success when they gave up."

– **Thomas Edison**

With every visit to the track I could feel my skill level improving, but even after 15 hours of practice, just taking my mind off the task for a moment would result in me losing rhythm or hitting the snow. Gradually as the winter progressed, I was getting more and more confident - I was able to manage 21km in around 2.5 hours. This was nothing spectacular, but finally a degree of competence which saw me overtaking other skiers and able to maintain a good rhythm. To others I looked pretty good but it was still a thinking skill. I was at the stage (**conscious competence**) where we can perform a skill relatively well if we focus on what we are doing hard enough.

And then one day it just happened! My mind was drifting, enjoying the blue ski and fabulous conditions, when I realised that a whole kilometre had passed by and I was still in rhythm. Still on my feet - A fleeting moment of '**unconscious competence**'. And as I congratulated myself on my new found skill a small rut caught me out and I was on the floor again. There is nothing like instant feedback - not so unconscious after all!

With every visit to the track my competence level increased, the speed, the rhythm, until I really began to look and feel like a Langlauf skier.

Next!

And here came the next challenge. Reaching a level of expertise is all well and good but when the challenge is no longer difficult enough the motivation can start to wane. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called this phenomenon 'flow'. He said that there is a sweet spot for every level of skill where the challenge is just enough to keep the participant fully engaged in what they are doing. So for me to maintain my Langlauf flow this meant tackling more technical courses, with hills. Going downhill on Langlauf skis is a whole new game to learn. So more learning and more opportunity!

This is a critical point. In life we will often choose to accept 'mediocre' results and performance or give up further into the learning process. Sadly we can and often do move backwards towards incompetence. Maintaining the motivation and relevance is critical.

Organisational Learning

What's all this got to do with business? Great organisations are the ones where people are always learning - I mean really learning, like my Langlauf. They are really challenged and supported in a way that enables them to grow and for the organisation to benefit. They are encouraged to 'fall down' on their backside in the snow, safe in the knowledge that they can get back up and have another go without everyone judging or being critical. They get to invest time in themselves to take their competence to a high rather than a superficial level.

Creating this environment requires real bravery from leaders. Bravery to invest time and money, bravery to risk the mistakes required to genuinely learn and yes bravery to also put on the skis themselves and be prepared to fall over with a smile.



Written by Adrian Marriott, March 2013

adrian@adrianmarriott.com

Adrian Marriott is an Elite Athlete having represented his country at Marathon distance. He is a performance coaching including being part of the England Athletics National Coaching Development Programme. Adrian also provides business consulting support.