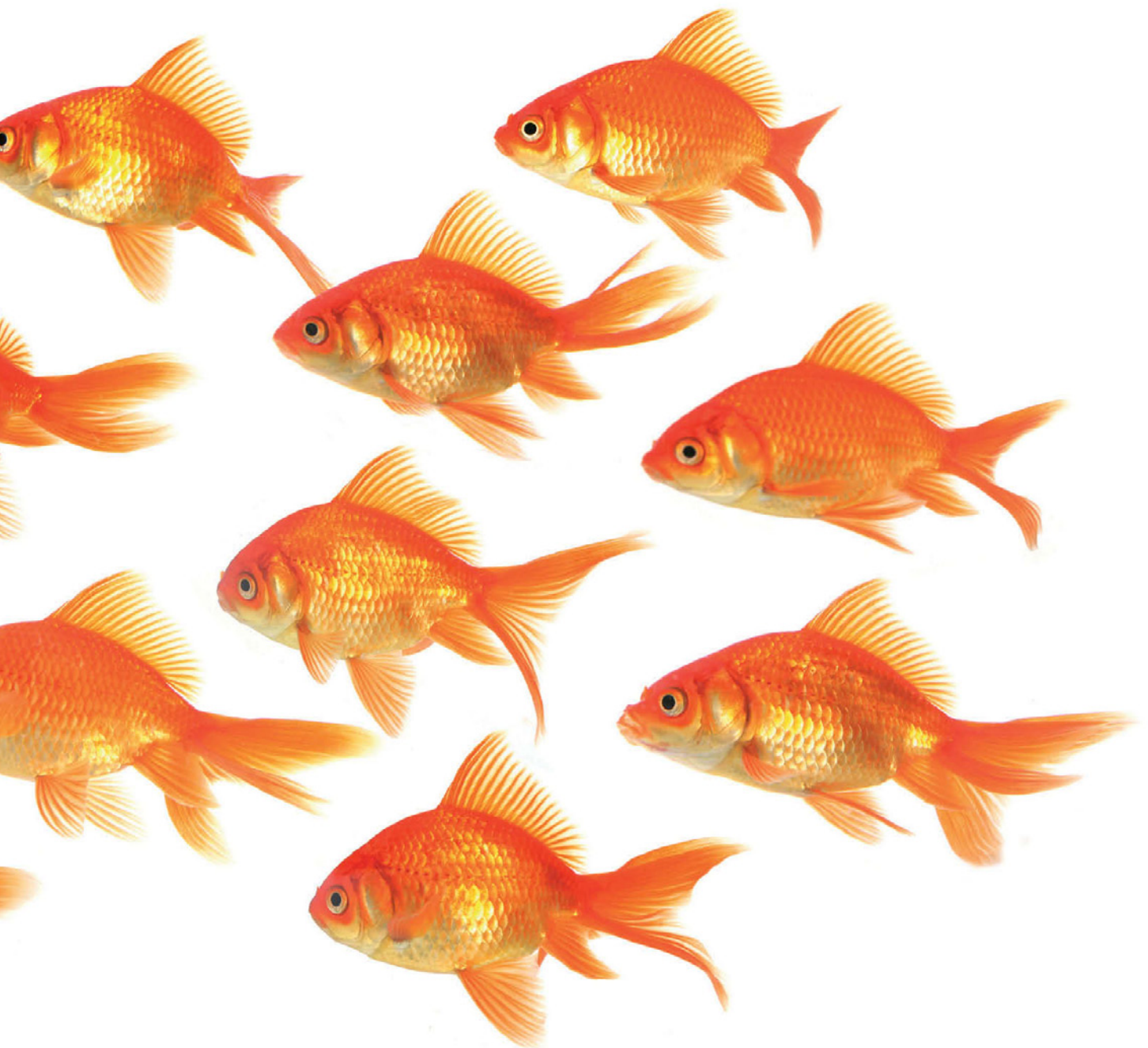


# Learning to Unlearn

BY BETTINA CHANG

Some employees enter a company or position with habits and assumptions not conducive to their new environment. What can learning leaders do to help them kick bad habits and embrace new ways of working?



In a second-round interview at Zappos.com, an online shoe retailer, an applicant might be thrown off by the question, “On a scale from 1 to 10, how weird are you?” It might seem like a trick question, but Zappos isn’t trying to keep weird people from entering its ranks — it’s seeking them out.

Third on the list of Zappos’ 10 core values is “Embrace fun and a little weirdness.” The company’s call center looks more like an amusement park than a place of business, and the customer service representatives are asked to remain on the phone for as long as it takes to “deliver happiness” to the customer. This can be a big change for many employees, said Roger Dana, senior operations supervisor for the pipeline team, the company’s training group.

“The employees [who] come in with the most call center experience, we have the hardest time trying to get them to unlearn,” Dana said. “It’s about breaking down the previous barriers.”

Many people have learned to perform tasks incorrectly or are influenced by past experience that is not right for their current organization’s approach, processes and culture. They may need to unlearn what they have learned to be able to grasp the latest initiative or embrace a new workplace culture.

Learning leaders must first and foremost use open and honest communication to help learners break down those barriers so employees can achieve their maximum potential.

### Why Is Unlearning Important?

Numerous factors prompt a need to unlearn, from large-scale organizational change to small, employee-specific changes that relate to technical abilities or social behavior. In either circumstance, an employee’s previous experience impedes his or her ability to perform.

The concept of unlearning goes hand in hand with change. While many books and white papers have been written about organizational change, there is a dearth of content on unlearning. Organizations need to succeed at both in order to improve and move forward, especially in this volatile business environment.

David Shaner, author of *The Seven Arts of Change*, said learning leaders need to understand where a learner is coming from before trying to change his or her old beliefs and habits.

“Senior management often makes the mistake of trying to teach learners without first asking, ‘What are those habits? Where is the cynicism when it comes to change programs?’ The designers of the learning initiative have to understand where the student is at any given time,” Shaner said.

From a biological standpoint, Shaner said nobody can entirely unlearn something. “What you can do,” he said, “is give a concerted effort to provide new training and new learning that trumps the old way of doing things.” In essence, there is no unlearning without the provision for a new idea to replace the old.

Kerry Patterson, co-founder of VitalSmarts, a consulting company for corporate training and organizational change, said humans are open to change, but the need to unlearn makes the change process more difficult.

“You’re an open vessel if you’re learning something anew, and that’s very easy,” Patterson said. But in cases when employees have previous information that acts as a barrier to change, learning leaders need to respectfully assess the situation before trying to rashly implement changes.



“People don’t resist change — they resist things that they think will end up badly for them,” he said. “They’ve got years of cognitive mass that are counter to what you’re telling them. They won’t do what you ask, and rightfully so. You need to first demonstrate why they need to change.”

### Out With the Old

For some businesses, the “why” question is answered easily. For example, employees might need to change because their company was acquired by another. In these situations, if the company’s integration strategy is communicated well to employees, it can be relatively simple to ask them to unlearn old ways and start anew.

Mike Cuffe, vice president of claims training and development at Farmers Insurance, was mindful of this when his company acquired 21st Century Insurance Group. An influx of new employees from a different company meant that many would have to unlearn the ways of their previous positions in order to become part of the Farmers family. From a technical perspective, they needed to learn a new operating plat-

## IN PRACTICE UNLEARNING BAD COMMUNICATION HABITS

**D**uring times of stress and urgency, employee communications can regress to reveal more primal behavior. E-mails are short and sharp and lack even a greeting; conversations are focused on the “headlines” without burrowing into the supporting details; and company updates are so dense and overwritten that no one actually reads them. Yet this pressurized environment is exactly where effective communication is needed most, because sharper communication skills build stronger business performance.

Many learning professionals today are either driving or supporting initiatives related to changes in business strategy. This makes it important to unlearn the frequently ineffective communication habits we all fall into under stress. When change is taking place, communication needs to be quick, consistent, truthful, frequent, crystal clear and immediate.

Effective communication is a competency increasingly needed in a fast-paced, competitive global economy. In March 2010, the American Management Association (AMA) surveyed more than 2,000 senior managers and found that communication skills — the ability to synthesize and transmit ideas in writing and orally — are expected to be the top employee development priority for the immediate future.

While effective communication is recognized as a core component of leadership, communication isn't just speaking or writing well. An individual also has to think clearly, understand what factors are most critical and express them persuasively.

The AMA's 2010 Critical Skills Survey also examined the importance of communication skills for performance reviews and hiring. Communication skills again ranked first among the competencies assessed on a yearly basis, and during the hiring process more organizations make an effort to assess communication abilities than any other competency.

Specifically, when it comes to communication, both learning professionals and the leaders they support need to:

- Have strong presentation skills that can be demonstrated in written and verbal formats through a variety of mediums.
- Formulate recommendations for learning and development in a persuasive way, build a compelling business case, use business language and

tie results to important performance metrics.

- Be verbally agile and establish one's brand and credibility in the context of the overall business strategy, demonstrating alignment with the vision for the business and the plan to execute on its strategic intent.

Success today is dependent on fostering innovation and creativity — that is, the ability to generate lots of new ideas supported by the understanding that some will succeed and most will fail. Consider: A learning professional is asked to implement a development program to encourage people to take more risks. Such a change will require communicating a compelling argument to help all employees understand the business needs related to innovation. Communications, supported by the appropriate behaviors, will explicitly let employees know that it is OK to take risks.

This learning professional will need to build an understanding that risk is valued and that failure is not punished. Ten ideas may be generated, but only two may succeed and yield positive results. The other eight may be discarded, but still will be celebrated as they were built with creativity and sound business judgment. Rejected ideas will no longer be seen as failures.

To move the culture from being risk-averse to one focused on innovation, employees also will need to be supported with tools to enable them to kick old habits. They will need to develop competencies in critical thinking and problem solving, as well as business acumen and financial analysis, so they can better rationalize creative solutions. They will need communication tools to present their new ideas in strong and powerful ways. They will need the ability to collaborate cross-functionally or across the globe in order to marshal their company's best thinking. And they will need a process for ongoing feedback to analyze successes and failures quickly, flexibly and with agility to understand the essence of good ideas or potential barriers to execution.

Over time, this new approach to communication and innovation will change the culture of the organization. Is it time for your workforce to unlearn bad habits? [CLO](#)

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form. They also needed to pass technical competency certification tests and go through Farmers Insurance's robust learning track.

New employees were glad to learn new processes and go through certification and training programs because the company communicated its business strategy to the entire workforce, Cuffe said. Farmers Insurance made it clear that new employees would not be at a disadvantage simply because they were new; the company would evaluate all employees based on their ability and performance rather than the amount of time at the company.

"We opened up a Web communications portal and our executives did visitations to facilities to lay out how we were going about this change process so we could reduce their fear and anxiety," Cuffe said.

The new employees were especially willing to adapt because they were joining Farmers Insurance after a period of uncertainty under 21st Century parent company AIG. Full understanding of the business strategy helped alleviate employees' feelings of uncertainty and allowed them to make way for change.

At times, employees have to unlearn when a company changes its business strategy. At J.C. Penney, customer surveys showed that only 47 percent of customers said they were highly satisfied with their experiences with the retailer in 2008. Deborah Masten, vice president of associate development for J.C. Penney, instituted a series of training initiatives, and by 2010, the satisfaction rate had climbed to 65 percent.

These training initiatives not only taught employees the customer service skills needed to improve the company, but also sought to break down the previous habits of employees at all levels.

One major change was required of associates in charge of replenishment and recovery. In the past, managers measured these associates' performance based on moving merchandise rather than assisting customers.

"We empowered our replenishment [and] recovery associates to take care of the customer first," Masten said. "If a customer was near them, they should look up and greet the customer, make them feel special and help them if they needed help. We saw the results in the customer surveys, and the associates felt better about themselves and the job they were doing."

This sense of well-being reinforced the new focus on customer service in a way that productivity standards alone couldn't. Masten said associates didn't resist these changes. It was the supervisors that were more challenging. Empowering associates to provide customer service and take responsibility for fulfilling requests in essence took power away from supervisors. At first, the supervisors were uncomfortable relinquishing control. That's when Masten's learning team

launched the Leading a CustomerFirst Team program to help with this transition.

"Over time, they saw the benefit of [the program] because they weren't called upon as much by associates, so they could do their own jobs more efficiently," Masten said. "We all have behaviors that we have to unlearn. It may not always be a tangible thing. It may not be explicit. But to learn new skills, you have to let the old ways go."

### In With the New

Regardless of whether a learning executive seeks to change behavior at an individual or organizational level, practitioners and consultants agree that a company must clearly articulate the goals of such unlearning. This communication should be grounded in mutual trust: Management must trust that employees will understand the drivers behind the change, and employees must trust that management is making the right decisions.

"The key is to give these employees new knowledge," Shaner said. "If you give them the knowledge of the boardroom about real markets, ownership structure and competitive threats, it helps the employee to understand that they're not being asked to do new things just because senior management has a big, autocratic club — it's because unless we change the way we work, we're history."

The Zappos team strengthened this mutual trust a few years ago after higher-ups entrusted an important task to employees at all levels: developing the company's 10 core values. Every employee was asked to think of a colleague who most embodied the Zappos spirit and then explain why. In effect, senior management crowdsourced the company's core values, engaging the workforce and creating a trusting atmosphere.

This sense of trust came into play when employees endured the company's most dramatic change yet: Amazon.com's acquisition of Zappos. "Whether it's a change as big as that, or something as small as a change in the attendance policy, it's always communicated," Dana said. "When the change came down from the upper-level executives, we have a lot of trust in each other. Those kinds of apprehensions mostly don't happen."

To successfully drive organizational change and help employees unlearn old ways, learning executives must help instill a sense of mutual trust among all levels of employees, whether it's through training programs or everyday culture. Learning leaders also should be conscious of the state of mind of employees and the existing assumptions and habits they hold. If there's a need for a learner to unlearn, as is likely to happen in a constantly changing business environment, learning executives should be transparent and strive to communicate the reasons behind that need. **CLO**