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Fall 2006

Theme: Back to School

“Experience is the adult learner’s living textbook.” Knowles

This past year I became a student again. The last time I wore that title, only women wore earrings, John Travolta had a bad case of *Saturday Night Fever*, and completing a Bachelor's degree in four years was the norm, not the exception! Let's just say that I've enjoyed a long sabbatical from the world of textbooks and yellow highlighters.

To be truthful, my extended absence from the world of academia was extremely intimidating to me. Could I discipline myself to endure the rigors of reading assignments and projects? More importantly, was I capable of learning and retaining new theory and schools of thought? Considering the fact that, at times, I can't even remember where I've parked my car, my fears were certainly valid.

To my surprise, my reservations were unfounded for one simple reason. I've never really taken a break from being the "student." My life and work have provided me with an endless array of learning opportunities. "*Experience is the adult learner's living textbook*" and I have been a devoted scholar.

In Olney, Maryland there is an organization highly committed to the personal and professional growth of its employee group. *Montgomery General Hospital*, led by Pete Monge and his enthusiastic leadership team, recognize the importance of promoting a continuous learning work environment. During a recent leadership training program, we examined ways that learning occurs outside of traditional educational and training experiences.

The US Department of Labor contends that 30% of workplace learning takes place during *formal* training programs. The remaining 70% occurs during *informal* experiences, which many refer to as on-the-job.

Although a reversal of this statistic would greatly enhance my personal sense of job security and perhaps better finance my passion for travel, the question remains. What can leaders do to help employees perceive *work* time as *school* time?

Here are a few suggestions:

- Support a mentoring program for all employees, not only new hires;
- Company sponsored book clubs and informal brown bag lunches are an excellent way for employees with similar interests to share ideas;
- Enhance annual performance appraisals to include employee "learning contracts". Encourage staff to pursue independent means of acquiring additional knowledge and skills. Reward those who do.
- View mistakes as learning, rather than disciplinary, opportunities. Ask questions that encourage reflection, evaluation, and problem solving instead of reprimanding the employee for what (s)he probably already knows.

Remember, creating learning work environments require that leaders also demonstrate a personal commitment and passion for learning! "*School is never out for the professional.*" I'll see you in class!

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