

CONFESSION NUMBER ONE: *There is No Such Thing as Common Sense*

Worth Remembering...

“Common Sense is the best distributed commodity in the world, for every man is convinced that he is well supplied with it.”

– René Descartes (1596-1650)

Don't rely on common sense as part of your training program. If you haven't taught someone how to complete the task the way you want it done, then don't assume they know how. Remember — common sense is not common practice.

Your role as a supervisor, department head or manager is to teach your people what they need to know to be able to do the job you've hired them to do. All too often we make the mistake of assuming a person's level of knowledge matches our own. (Especially if they have been working for the organization a number of years.) To our minds, common sense makes perfect sense. However, that's not always the case.

In this chapter we'll dispel some of the myths surrounding common sense (Common Sense Revisited) and give you some valuable insights into how adults like to learn (You Can Teach an Old Dog New Tricks). Adults can learn new things given the right set of circumstances in an environment that is conducive to learning. But, we all don't learn the same way. One teaching style — like one management style — does not fit all.

Common Sense Revisited

“Students will never learn if the teacher doesn’t teach.”

Worth Remembering...

“We seldom attribute common sense except to those who agree with us.”

– François La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680)

Have you ever asked yourself where common sense comes from? How do we get it? Are we just born with it? Why do some people seem to have more of it than others? If something makes perfectly good sense to you, shouldn’t it make perfectly good sense to everyone else? I’ve been doing some research on the subject and here’s what I’ve discovered so far. I’ve discovered that the only thing common about common sense is that it’s not very prevalent in most people.

Common sense is not common practice. What makes perfect sense to you will most likely not make perfect sense to everyone else. I’m not sure who first coined the phrase “there is no such thing as common sense”, but the more I observe the people around me and witness the strange things they do, the more I’m convinced the saying is true.

I think it was Michael Dillon who defined common sense as “a rather uncommon ability to do the right thing without a lot of forethought; a close connection to deep intuition.” A participant in a recent workshop of mine suggested that common sense was the lowest common denominator of beliefs thought to be common in most people.

Common sense is sometimes referred to as “horse sense”. Horse sense is our ability to look at things in a straightforward, logical fashion. (That might be easy for Spock to do, but it can be a challenge for us mere mortals.)

The amount of common sense we have seems to be proportionate to the amount of life experiences we’ve had. We should call it “life

sense” instead of common sense because it just seems to me that the older we get, the smarter we get. (Been there — done that — I won’t do that again!)

Worth Remembering...

“When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But by the time I turned twenty-one, I was amazed at how much he had learned in seven years.”

– Mark Twain (1835-1910)

I believe we are born with a blank slate. From the moment of our birth until the moment that we die, we increase our level of common sense through the people we meet, the books we read, and the things we see and do.

For the most part, we adults like to learn as we go along. We learn from our past experiences — having been there and done that. (Some people, though, are slow learners and they have to experience the same thing a few times before they finally catch on.) Some people learn by trial and error. They learn by doing, refining what they’ve done, and then they do it again until they are satisfied with the result.

Here’s a question for you: Have you ever been guilty of using common sense as part of your training program?

Do any of these sound familiar: “How long have they worked here? You’d figure after five years they would have learned that by now!” Or how about this: “If they had any common sense at all, they never would have tried to do it that way in the first place.”

I’m sure most of us have been guilty of using the “common sense” rationale to try and cover up the fact that we failed to give proper instruction and guidance. I know I’ve used that excuse on more than one occasion. But if you really think about it logically like Spock would, you’d come to the conclusion that people aren’t born knowing what they need to know.

The best that you can hope for is that you hire people who are capable of learning.

As managers, we sometimes make assumptions based on what we think a person knows. We figure because *we* know, *they* should know.

We surmise that, because they have worked in one place for a number of years, they must have learned how to do their job by now. The bottom line is: if you haven't taught someone how to complete a task the way you want it done, then don't assume they know how to do it. It's very rare that we get to hire employees who are fully trained for the job we've hired them to do. Even someone from within the company who has been transferred from another location needs to be brought up to speed on how you do things at your branch. New employee orientation programs shouldn't be just for your recent hires.

Managers need to think of themselves as “Enablers”

It's the manager's job to give their people the tools they'll need to be successful, and then to get out of their way and let them do it.

Common Sense Revisited:

- Remember: There is no such thing as common sense. Common sense is not necessarily common practice.
- People aren't born with common sense, but most people are born with the ability to learn it. (Just remember that there are slow learners out there, so be patient.)
- Common sense is an acquired skill. Through observation, proper instruction and practice, people can become competent over time. (Notice I didn't say “will”. That's open for debate.)
- Ask yourself: Do I hire stupid people or do they just get stupid after working for me?

- Remember: Your role as manager is to teach someone else what you know.
- You are an enabler. Give them all the tools they will need to be successful, and then get out of their way and let them do it.

The rest of this chapter is dedicated to giving you some valuable insights into how adults like to learn and the steps you need to take to ensure the lessons you are trying to teach have been received. In order to teach someone what you know you need to be able to create an environment that is conducive to learning. Everyone has the ability to learn. It depends on how receptive they are to how they are being taught.

Worth Remembering...

“Experience is the name everyone gives to their mistakes.”

– Oscar Wilde (1854-1900)

You Can Teach an Old Dog New Tricks

“Adults will learn when conditions are right.”

Worth Remembering...

“You can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink it. The trick is, find out how to make him thirsty.”

– Author Unknown

Supervisors, managers, and leaders will be judged not by what they know, but by their ability to teach someone else. But trust me — teaching someone else what you know isn’t easy. If that was the case, superstar athletes would go on to have superstar coaching careers after their playing days were over. And we know, in most cases — that just doesn’t happen.

Answer this: If you understood how I like to receive and process information and how I prefer to be taught, and if you applied what you know about my learning preferences, would it make the teaching experience more enjoyable for you and for me? Would I be more receptive to what you were saying and therefore more likely to try? We both know the answer would probably be a resounding yes!

Warning: Reading the following section on Adult Learning Styles and Adult Learning Preferences may cause drowsiness. If you are suffering from sleeplessness this could be just what the Doctor ordered. Caution — Read at your own risk.

Now, I don’t want to come off sounding too clinical here. I’m not an academic by any stretch of the imagination even though I teach at a business college and hold a teaching certificate. But I think it’s important to have a basic understanding of how adults like to learn.

We are going to explore the works of two prominent experts in the field of adult learning:

Dr. David Kolb, an educational theorist who believes that people learn best from experience (Experiential learning) and Malcolm Knowles, a pioneer in the study of adult learning (The five step learning process).

Remember: even older people like me can learn new things. And if you understand how I like to learn and you apply that understanding, we just might surprise you.

People develop learning preferences much in the same way they develop their own negotiating, management, and leadership styles.

Dr. David Kolb theorized that people develop preferences for different learning styles in the same way that they develop their negotiating, management, and leadership styles. In layman terms, Kolb believes adults learn quicker if they can relate what is being taught to past personal experiences. Kolb's experiential learning model is built around the idea that learning preferences can be described using two continuums: an active experimentation/reflective observation continuum, and an abstract conceptualization/concrete experience continuum. These two continuums produce four different learning styles or four types of learners.

I'm a behaviorist by training and believe we develop a certain style of behaving by the time we are five years old and generally speaking we "fit" into one of these four styles. (We'll talk more about that in Chapter Three when we discuss DISC Theory and putting your strengths to work for you.) Dr. Kolb found that the four combinations of perceiving (how we see things) and processing (how we evaluate what we see) determine our learning style.

Which learning style sounds more like you?

- 1. Converger** — active experimentation — abstract conceptualization: you're a doer and thinker who likes to find solutions to problems and experiment with new ideas.

2. **Accommodator** — active experimentation — concrete experience: you're a doer and feeler, taking a more "hands-on", collegial approach to problem-solving.
3. **Assimilator** — reflective observation — abstract conceptualization: you're a watcher and thinker. If it makes logical sense, you'll do it.
4. **Diverger** — reflective observation — concrete experience: you're a feeler and a watcher. You can look at things from different angles, the more ideas the merrier.

Learning Preferences:

Convergers, Accommodators, Assimilators, Divergers: Is there a key here? Can you use this information to create an environment that is conducive to learning based on a person's learning style? Take a moment and review the learning preferences of each style and think of how you could structure your teaching to be more in tune with how each style likes to learn.

Convergers — like to apply information in practical ways. They focus on specific problems and prefer to work with "things" rather than people.

Accommodators — are always ready to try something new and like to step outside their comfort zone. Accommodators are risk-takers who live by a flexible plan. They enjoy people, change, and a fast-paced job.

Assimilators — excel with theoretical situations and inductive reasoning. They like to draw conclusions from known facts and then put that theory into practice. However, they prefer to work alone.

Divergers — are imaginative and complex thinkers who enjoy brainstorming while problem-solving. They enjoy people, make friends easily, and most likely have broad cultural interests.

According to Dr. Kolb, the learning cycle involves four processes that must be present before learning takes place:

1. Concrete experience — *relating it to past experiences, good or bad*

2. Observation and reflection on that experience — *was it good or bad?*
3. Formation of abstract concepts based on reflection — *what to do or not do*
4. Testing the new concepts — *try it and see what happens*

Worth Remembering...

*"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."
– Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)*

What is your learning preference? If you are interested in discovering your own learning style, I recommend that you score a Kolb Learning Style Inventory (KLS Inventory). The inventory is available exclusively through the Hay Group Transforming Learning at www.haygroup.com. I scored a KLS Inventory and discovered that my primary learning modes involve — Active Experimentation and Concrete Experience. I use an Accommodating style. I tend to accommodate, or adapt to, changing circumstances and information.

Understanding your learning style and the strengths and weaknesses inherent in that style will help you increase your learning power to get the most from your learning experiences and it also lets you appreciate the different learning styles and what you need to do to teach someone who has a different style than yours.

Adults can learn new things given the right set of circumstances and in an environment that they believe is conducive to learning.

Malcolm Knowles, an influential contemporary figure in adult education, observed that adults can learn new things when:

1. They understand why something is important to know or do.
2. They have the freedom to learn in their own way.
3. Learning is experiential.

4. The time is right for them to learn.
5. The process is positive and encouraging.

As I stated earlier, adults can learn new things — given the right set of circumstances and in an environment that is conducive to learning. Think of ways that you could apply Knowles’s five principles of adult learning to create that learning environment.

1. Adults learn when they understand why something is important to know or do. Make sure everyone understands the “why” in what you are trying to teach them. They may not agree, but they need to know your reasoning, and it can’t be just because you said so. You are working with adults here, not children. (Although, I don’t think saying “because I said so” to a child works very well either — at least not in my world.)

It’s important to note here that today’s students are encouraged to ask the teacher why. They are taught to challenge traditional thinking. So you’d better take the time to explain “why” they need to know “what” you are trying to teach them and “what” the consequence(s) will be if the “why” isn’t achieved.

2. Adults learn when they have the freedom to learn in their own way. Think back to Kolb’s Learning Style Inventory and apply it here. Try and incorporate all of the senses in your approach to ensure that learning has taken place. Remember that visual learners rely on pictures, auditory learners listen to what is being said, and kinesthetic learners need to physically do something to fully understand what it is you are trying to teach them. Try not to get too caught up on the process though — results are what matter most. And keep in mind that adults like to put their own spin on the “how”.

3. Learning is experiential. Adults like to relate or link new knowledge to past experiences. Any activity that gets your learner involved makes the learning experiential. Group discussions, role playing, building

something — any activity at all will work. Activities are also a great way to keep people energized and engaged, especially activities that involve getting up and moving around. Make ice-breakers and lid-openers part of your teacher's tool kit.

4. **The time is right for them to learn.** There is an old Buddhist saying: “When the Student is ready, the Teacher will appear.” Adults like to learn in their own time. And what they learn must be relevant and applicable to them. Adults, for the most part, only want to know what they need to know and only when they need to know it. They aren't looking to stockpile information on the chance that they might need to know it in the future. (Children are sponges who crave knowledge while adults like to pick and choose when, what, and where they learn.)
5. **The process is positive and encouraging.** As a teacher you are trying to get people to step out of their comfort zone into the growth zone. Be ever mindful of the fact that they are most likely trying something for the very first time. They are going to make mistakes. They need to know that you aren't going to zap them when they do. They need to know that they can trust you, that you won't belittle them in front of their peers. And they need to know that they can ask you any question — no matter how trivial you might think it is — and you'll answer it without sarcasm. You need to have patience in spades because some people learn quicker than others.

Be their biggest fan! Cheer them on with each small victory by praising their performance and giving them words of encouragement. If you truly want them to be successful, then your praise and words of encouragement will sound sincere. Adults can tell when you're being condescending and insincere. They don't like to be patronized.

Everything we choose to do alters our brain and it fundamentally changes who we are, a process that continues until we die. The human brain has the ability to reprogram itself. However, if you don't use it, you'll lose it.

This section would not be complete without writing about the work of Dr. Richard Restak. The doctor is a neurologist, neuropsychiatrist, and clinical professor of neurology at George Washington University Medical Center. He wrote a fascinating book entitled *Mozart's Brain and the Fighter Pilot: Unleashing Your Brain's Potential*, first published in 2001.

Dr. Restak's book isn't so much about *how* adults like to learn but rather that adults *can* learn.

It's been scientifically proven that most adults do have the brain capacity to learn. (I say most adults because there's always an exception to the rule. As the saying goes, "some dogs just can't hunt".)

We all understand that the more you exercise right, eat right and sleep right, the healthier your body becomes. And the healthier your body becomes, the better you feel. And the better you feel, the more equipped you are to handle the daily stressors in your life. The same thing holds true for your brain. According to Restak, the more you exercise your brain, the better it performs; and when it performs better, we feel better. Restak goes on to point out that there is one exception between your body and your brain that is worth noting. Your body does begin to break down over time. A 60-year-old body, no matter how fit, can't do some of the physical things a 20-year-old body can. (I can relate to that.) The good news is that your brain is different. All of the new research on the brain suggests that no matter how old you are, it's never too late to change your brain for the better. Your brain doesn't break down over time; it just keeps getting brainier! The brain has a lifetime capacity for learning new things.

The choices we make throughout our lives play a part in altering the fundamental nature of our brain. Whenever we undertake new interests and activities, we form new networks in our brain. And with those new networks come more receptors for the brain's chemical messengers. New circuits are forming all the time, depending on our

levels of mental activity or inactivity. Cognitive learning theorizes that we can boost our brain's cognitive performance by increasing alertness, concentration, memory, problem-solving ability, mental endurance, and much more.

That's the good news. The bad news is that if we don't use it, we lose it.

Just like a plant, if we don't keep watering and nurturing it, it will shrivel up and die. The point I'm trying to make here is what I've always believed: that if someone has the mental and physical capacity to perform a job or complete a task, then it is up to the supervisor or manager to teach that person how. Whether or not your staff are motivated enough to want to perform the job or complete the task is something entirely different. (We'll talk about motivation or the lack thereof in Chapter Two.)

I hope you're up for the challenge. To my mind, there is nothing more rewarding than teaching someone else what you know and seeing the light-bulb come on. For me, it's the feeling I get when I see the penny click and their eyes light up. It's that Ah-Ha Moment.

Worth Remembering...

"Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web ... suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue."

– Henry James (1843-1916)

Confession Number One Review:

- Don't rely on common sense as part of your training program.
- People aren't born knowing what they need to know.
- Common sense is "Life Sense". It seems that the older we get the smarter we get. (We've been there, done that and have the t-shirt to prove it.)
- Managers need to think of themselves as enablers. (Provide the tools that your people will need to do the job you've hired them to do.)
- Adults can learn new things — given the right set of circumstances and in an environment that is conducive to learning.
- Not everyone learns the same way. Discover how people like to learn and then use that understanding to teach them what they need to know.
- Most adults learn best by observing and doing.
- Incorporate Knowles Five Principles of Learning in your teaching style.
- Do you hire stupid people or do they just get stupid after working for you?
- Your job as a manager is to teach people what you know.

Worth Remembering...

"Intellectual capital is the sum of everything everybody in a company knows that gives it a competitive edge. Tap into the experience of an older generation."

– Thomas A. Stewart (b. 1948-)