



LEARNING AND PERFORMING

Dear Editor,

This note is triggered by the article in Volume 11 Number 5 entitled, “Quality vs. Perfectionism: When Does Our Push for Excellence Become Dysfunctional?” The purpose of my comments is to offer another frame of reference through which to consider this question: the judo dojo (practice hall).

Sport judo is built on throwing techniques and ground techniques. A match always begins in a standing position, and most of the match takes place in this position. But if the opponents fall onto the mat, they engage in ground techniques. One of the main focal points for judo players is to learn how to throw their opponents while in turn not being thrown by them. And herein lies the frame of reference for a life lesson.

If you come to a dojo and observe judo students over many practice sessions, an important phenomenon becomes apparent. If two students have about the same degree of physical and intellectual development, the factor that most affects their development in judo is how they approach practice. The students tend to fall into two categories: those who have a performance paradigm and those who have a learning paradigm. These two categories are roughly equivalent to perfectionism and quality in the referenced article.

Students who have a performance paradigm in practice seek to avoid being thrown. They compete in a defensive manner, with all their focus on how to prevent their opponents’ success. When they do get thrown, their self-talk is punishing and judging. These players are very hard on themselves.

Contrast performance-paradigm students with learning-paradigm students. The latter approach practice sessions with the goal of learning

what they have to do to throw their opponents. They compete in an offensive manner. They understand that, as the cliché says, the best defense is a good offense. They also recognize that developing a good offense entails taking the risk of being thrown. And, in fact, they will be thrown many times.

The student with the learning paradigm responds to being thrown

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completely differently than does the performance-paradigm student. The learner asks, “What did my opponent do? What was I doing? What could I have done differently? What will I do differently next time?” The learner then experiments with a different approach. For this individual, the practice session is a continuous experiment.

Now envision the differences in the body language, behavior, and energy level in these different types. The performance-paradigm people curse, call themselves derogatory names, stomp around, get more and more frustrated, and generally aren’t much fun to be around. On the other hand, the learners are calm, ask questions, listen to the answers, gain confidence, and have fun (or at least gain self-satisfaction).

Who develops judo skills more rapidly? The learners develop the skills much more rapidly than do the others. The learners also tend to be the students who stay with judo and earn higher and higher ranks. The students who have a performance paradigm tend to drop out because the frustration is too great.

How does this lesson from judo translate into the corporate environment and other aspects of life? My hypothesis is that a performance-measurement process is useful only if it gives us information about how well our developmental, or learning, process is working. Regrettably, corporate performance-appraisal systems tend to focus on performance rather than on development, and they tend to be punitive rather than rewarding. They do nothing to support individuals’ intrinsic needs nor are they typically extrinsically rewarding.

Most companies fail to understand that, when people are learning, performance takes care of itself. In his book, *The Path of Least Resistance* (Fawcett Columbine, 1989), Robert Fritz describes a learning process based on continually setting stretch goals before mastering current goals. Subsequent performance measurement shows that mastery of the earlier phase skills occurs as the student pursues the stretch goals. This process emerges from a learning paradigm, not from a performance paradigm.

One corporation that I have worked with recently instituted a developmental process that includes setting performance standards, providing employees with weekly feedback on their performance vis-à-vis the standards, and most important, offering coaching as needed to help them meet those standards. The focus is now on learning. The results: Overall performance has improved rapidly and significantly; employee turnover has decreased significantly; and morale has improved—all in a few months. Unfortunately, most corporations, school systems, and individuals have not yet made the shift from a performance to a learning paradigm. ■

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