

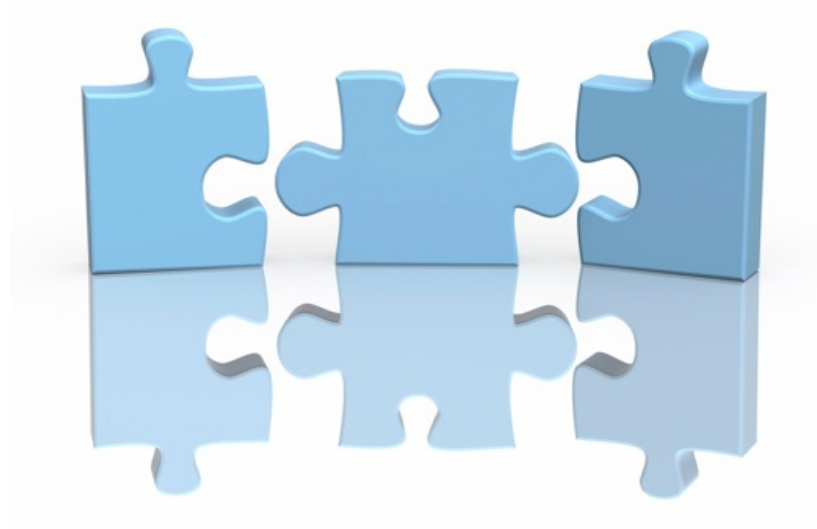
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INSPIRE LEADERSHIP:

Strengthen three core capabilities to grow and achieve more

Three core capabilities distinguish exceptional lifelong learners from people who can't break from unsuccessful ways of behaving. Learn what these capabilities are and how to apply them.

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I've coached many individuals on ways to become more effective salespeople, negotiators, managers, or organizational leaders. Highly motivated and intelligent people often struggle to learn and apply behaviors that could make them more successful. Here are three core capabilities that distinguish exceptional lifelong learners from people who can't break out of less successful ways of behaving.

Appraising the Situation

- Do your professional associates characterize you as an exceptional listener?
- When interacting with others, do you frequently check in to ensure that you understand what they're saying?
- When receiving negative feedback, do you become defensive or withdraw rather than try to understand why others have that perception?
- Can you describe the core values or beliefs that drive your day-to-day behaviors?
- When a core belief is challenged, do you react automatically or respond in ways that create choices about your course of action?

Best Practices

Here are the three core capabilities that mark top lifetime learners, and some behaviors to strengthen them.

Other-focused listening. Whether learning new selling techniques, working with clients, or leading others, the most critical capability for success is listening. Superior listening means listening from the other person's perspective. It allows us to understand the deeper meaning of the message, not simply the surface thought. Also, people are much more willing to listen to us if they believe we listen to them and respect their ideas. Great listeners are outwardly focused and seek first to understand before seeking to be understood.

An effective way to become a better listener is to work on "reflecting" skills. This involves summarizing what others say at strategic points in the conversation and then listening for confirmation or further elaboration. If a client mentions that she likes the fit of the jacket because it makes her look thin but not black, an effective reflecting response would be a simple summary statement like, "So, you like the fit, but not the color." It's important to pause and listen to how the person responds. Another way to improve listening skills is to study the behavior of exceptional listeners.

Willingness to tolerate discomfort. Over a lifetime, we inadvertently learn subtle (and unsubtle) ways to avoid discomfort. Examples include interrupting or terminating a conversation when someone starts to say something disagreeable, deprioritizing (or delegating) unpleasant activities, or keeping quiet to avoid conflict. To strengthen this capability we need to become astute self-observers and learn the ways we avoid discomfort, and

then work to better control our response. Growth and learning often are accompanied by effort and occasional pain (suffering is optional), and we should avoid running from them. Those who can tolerate discomfort can actually apply new behaviors, not just talk about them.

The ability to understand, challenge, and even change core values and beliefs. Life experiences create values that fuel core beliefs. These beliefs drive our reactions to situations that limit—or expand—our actions and ability to change behavior. Some values and beliefs that we developed when we were young may no longer serve us well. A salesperson, for example, may negotiate poorly because of a personal belief about what something is worth; a store owner may fail to notice new buying patterns that result from changing cultural values and not adapt effectively. Unless we consciously stop and give ourselves choices, we're much more likely to follow old behavior patterns and do the same things while expecting different results—a common definition of insanity. To become better learners, we first need to become aware of the values and core beliefs that drive our reactions and not react rashly when they're challenged. Be prepared to change even the most sacred beliefs when what you want is not what you're getting.

About Shanker Inc.

Martin Shanker is the founder and president of Shanker Inc., a Manhattan-based international management consulting firm for such companies as Burberry, Cartier, The Estee Lauder Companies, Ralph Lauren and Van Cleef & Arpels. Described as a 'behaviorist' by The New York Times, Martin specializes in helping global brands accelerate sales and profit by growing their companies from within. By addressing the tough issues of sales and management teams, and the behavioral dimension of retail relationships, Shanker Inc. offers a unique, multi-dimensional way for companies to achieve success through their own people.

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