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Gawande and Performance

Each individual could be classified as a performer as so often we have heard the suggestion that life is a stage and we are all performers on that stage, making decisions and executing behaviors based on our individual characteristics, so it becomes necessary that we continuously refine our performance on this stage expressing those characteristics, personal and societal. Gawande takes performance further when he wrote, "We face obstacles of seemingly unending variety. Yet somehow we must advance, we must refine, we must improve." Gawande references performance through three challenges we must face in diligence, to do right and through ingenuity to surmount those obstacles. Gawande's observation is the fundamental building block toward learning at work.

To advance, to refine, to improve, requires a lifelong commitment to learning in our working careers. But, do we truly understand what this learning requires and do we all have the same understanding of what is involved to achieve these results? Gawande believes it is to "live a life of responsibility" and accepting responsibility for how we do our work. How we go about doing work well is the important question, and each individual must define how best to answer that question. Without responsibility for our thoughts and actions, our failures and successes, no individual can advance performance for themselves or as an integral component of a learning society.

Advancement in learning at work is not simply achieving promotion and monetary gain, it is also gaining personal satisfaction with the knowledge that we have positively contributed to lives of the people we serve, as well as to ourselves. To achieve that level of success requires we accept responsibility for our failures, and through diligence, learning from those failures in order to enhance our performance, or as Gawande writes about the Sternins, Tufts University nutritionists, utilizing "positive deviance", understanding our capabilities and building upon them, rather than trying to improve upon or initiate characteristics we may not possess and that may require deviating from societal norm. David Dorsey explores more of the Sternins' philosophy in his article, "Positive Deviant", specifically referencing their eight steps of adopting positive deviance in your change program. Step one; "Don't presume that you have the answer" is most important of these steps. Although your answer may have validity, you must be cognizant that someone else's answer to improved performance may result in cohesive advancement of learning and higher level of success that could be lost if we assume we have already reached the pinnacle. However, deviance itself may be a difficult hurdle to overcome as society as a whole frowns upon deviance. Subsequently, it would first be necessary to understand that deviant behavior toward learning can have positive consequences if the ultimate goal is advancement of society.

Once we have achieved a modicum of advancement through diligence, it becomes necessary to refine those advancements, to weed out what doesn't work and dedicate ourselves into a higher level of learning in order to refine what does work. This step requires an understanding that learning at work is never ending and that success is not an end result to advancement, but just the beginning of a new

journey. However, it also becomes necessary that there is meaning to this journey, as well as an emotional attachment to its end result. James Harter wrote, "When emotional needs are met, worker attention, cognition and performance should increase." Consequently, continuous awareness of your progress and emotional needs will require re-evaluation and self-criticism of your performance at every level.

There is no level of advancement that cannot be improved upon. However, it also becomes necessary to identify a motivation to improve. Gawande focused on performance as an application that "can refer simply to the activity of a unit (an individual, a team, a department) of an organization intended to accomplish some desired result". It is that desired result that becomes your motivation keeping in mind that one desired result then builds upon an understanding of learning to branch out into other paths needing improvement. Whether it is an individual path within a learning society, or a group effort, it is important to keep an open mind with a broad view on cause and effect. A narrow perspective on simply self-improvement does not allow an individual's full integration within a learning society. Self improvement and enhanced performance requires attention to co-workers ideas and this requires ingenuity. As we each struggle with our own performance, incorporating each of our failures, strengths and characteristics leads to a better insight toward solving negative issues and advancing our learning society along the path of discovery in order to do right for society.