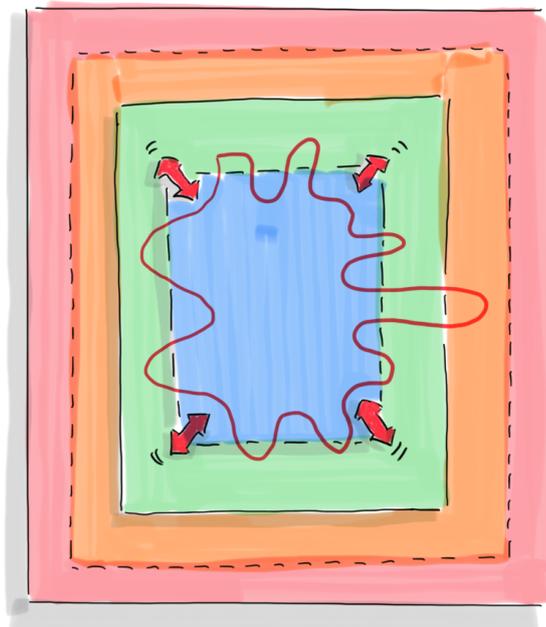


Employability, comfort zones and conscious breathing

18.02.2021, David Fiorucci



Life as we have known it till now has certainly changed: social distancing, working from home, lockdowns, restrictions on leisure activities and many other things have forced us out of our comfort zones. While this has stoked people's fears and anxieties (please read my article on the notion of courage), it has also driven us to discover new resources in ourselves and others.

But if this crisis had not arisen, would we have changed and developed? Would we have stayed in our comfort zone? Will we return there when it is all over?

Obviously, most of us are going to learn and grow, and grasp this opportunity, but others will wipe these unpleasant experiences from their minds, return to their comfort zone and get comfortable again. They will settle back into an apparent but misleading serenity.

And if you look around and take stock of these recent months, you will find there are people of all ages, young and old, who have settled down into their comfort zone and refused to come out. They are unaware of the dangers inherent in this zone, the risk of dying a slow death.

Allow me, using a well-known model structured around comfort and stretch zones, to offer you a tool that will make you aware of this risk and – above all – stimulate personal growth and help you avoid extremes. For our present purpose, growth and development is represented by the activity of conscious breathing.

The model I am referring to (see image above) consists of four distinct areas.

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In the centre, in blue, is your **comfort zone**. This represents the things we are in control of, the situations we enjoy and which make us feel confident. Here, you can do your work without having to think very much, without feeling stressed.

Moving outwards from the comfort zone, we come to the **learning zone**, shown in green. Whenever we are in the situation of learning something new, facing new horizons, we are in this zone. It does not necessarily mean we are participating in a face-to-face training session or video conference. We enter this zone whenever we have a discussion that might cause us to grow, that makes us think, stimulates and challenges us. A conversation with a colleague, a course, reading an article, watching a video (conference), even a heated argument, are all times when we enter into this zone and have the opportunity to learn.

In the model illustrated here, you will see a red line running back and forwards, into and out of the comfort and learning zones. This emphasizes the point that it is important to get out of one's comfort zone, take on board something new (here self-reflection is important), then return to one's comfort zone to apply and test what one has learned. This constant back-and-forth between comfort zone and learning zone is essential if we want to grow and develop.

I like to visualize this as the act of conscious breathing. The red line represents the way we breath (taking air in and letting it out), and it is this that keeps us alive. If you stop breathing, there's only one outcome: sooner or later you'll die! To give more force to the metaphor, think of divers, who perform very precise conscious breathing exercises. Thanks to these exercises, they can increase their lung capacity and stay underwater for incredibly long periods. The exercises enable them to increase their lung capacity by more than 100%. Amazing! A diver like Guillaume Néry (twice world champion) can develop a lung capacity of 10 litres, whereas our so-called "vital" lung capacity is between 3.5 and 4 litres. Similarly, the act of learning and applying what we have learned, moving from our comfort zone to the learning zone and back again, enables us not only to stay "alive" and grow, but also to enlarge our comfort zone. Our control, our mastery is increased.

In my training courses, I often use a spinning top to show that you have to keep moving if you want to stay balanced and "alive".

Quotation:

"To develop, to remain competitive, you must keep moving."

David Fiorucci

To return to our model, you can see that sometimes the red line goes beyond the learning zone and enters into a third zone, the first part of which is orange. This is the **panic zone**. Obviously, there are some situations and events that cause us to panic. This is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. If we don't stay in the panic zone too long, but manage to return to the learning zone and so to the comfort zone, the "shock" we have experienced will often enable us to develop more quickly and in greater depth. When we are in this panic zone, it is important to have someone (a supervisor, coach, friend, colleague or family member) who can support us and help us get back to safer territory. The danger is that we may remain too long in the panic zone. This has happened to me, and it happens on a regular basis. Recently, a manager in the IT department of a major Swiss business told me that he had been in the panic zone for the

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last 15 months. In these circumstances, it is very important to observe the signals your body is giving you. Sooner or later, your reserves will be depleted.

N.B. It is interesting to observe that people managing the exact same workload may be in their comfort zone, the learning zone or the panic zone. We all differ in terms of resources and some people can do a lot more than others without giving the impression they are overwhelmed, while others are quickly reduced to panic. We must therefore consider each person as an individual, with their past history, resources and potential, and refrain from comparing one person with another.

Coming back to our model, if you stay too long in the panic zone, there is a serious risk that you will go even further and end up in the red zone: the **death zone**. Here, the moment will come when your body says: STOP! Burn-out, a heart attack, a stroke or some other physical or mental health problem will kick in. This is a lose-lose situation for everyone: the individual, his or her company, colleagues, supervisor, family and so on. It is vital to be aware of the symptoms and to take action. Once this point has been reached, there is a danger of “**sudden death**”.

But this is not the real message of this model; the key message is as follows: If I stay in my comfort zone and don't venture out of it, death is also assured, but in this case a **slow death**!

Apart from the risk of “bore-out” (the opposite of burn-out), the main danger is that I become less employable, to the point where no one would want to take me on. The world is changing, customers and consumers are changing, business is changing, colleagues are changing, technologies are changing – so can I afford to remain stuck in my comfort zone? The moment when it is too late to change is reached more quickly than you might think. So, here again, you need to act, and act quickly.

The point to emphasize is that responsibility for my employability lies with me. I am the person responsible for my employability, not other people, not my company. Of course, good senior managers, good companies will stimulate their employees, facilitating and encouraging their development. They will establish a framework in which development is possible. But if development is really to take place, the employee must want it, feel capable of it and have the right to pursue it.

To conclude this article, I would advise you, as a twice-yearly exercise, to print off the diagram showing the four zones and to reflect, alone or with a supervisor or your employees, on these questions:

- In which zone am I at the present time (looking back at the last two or three weeks)?
- When have I been in the learning zone during the last six months?
- What have I learned and, more importantly, put into practice (i.e. transferred from the learning to the comfort zone)?
- Have I been in the panic zone? What caused this? Or who caused it? How did I get out of it? Who helped me out of it?
- What is the main thing I have learned? And who could benefit from it?

I would encourage you to practice conscious breathing, keep moving and so develop in a healthy way.

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