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Got Growth?

Penalty-free environment provides safe haven for training

Lets employees learn new skills without fear of damaging resources, reputation

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Every business finds itself adapting to change sooner or later, and one of the most effective strategies for implementing change is the penalty-free environment.

A penalty-free environment is when an individual can try something new and different without the risk of doing damage or looking foolish. It is an easy concept to understand, and a difficult environment to create.

There are four basic steps to creating a penalty-free environment:

Provide good training

Your training program should have a list of learning objectives, written reference material, and incorporate hands-on exercises. These can be in the form of role playing (sales), computer-based work (data entry), or working with tools and equipment (mechanical).

It should also have a testing mechanism and some form of recognition for successful completion of the training, such as a certificate, badge, pin or card.

One part of training often overlooked is the time required to complete it. Rushing someone through a training course does not help them learn. You must have patience and recognize that each person learns differently and at different speeds.

Provide appropriate resources

People cannot fully develop confidence in new skills and knowledge in a virtual environment; they have to actually do it. A PowerPoint presentation on how to use a new piece of software is not enough; you must provide a computer system for people to experience the software first hand in a real-world environment.

Instructions, books, diagrams, slides, etc. are all valuable resources to aid in the learning, but are no replacement for doing.

You must allow for adequate time to learn, study and practice before putting people into a real-world environment using their newfound knowledge and skills.

Isolate the resources

One of the primary reasons people resist change is fear of doing damage. "What if I cost us a client? What if I break a piece of expensive equipment or waste a lot of expensive material?"

You must make certain the learning and practicing process will not harm or interfere with the regular day-to-day business, regardless of how well people have learned.

You cannot train on new software using live data. You must use data that can be erased at a whim and recreated quickly and easily allowing someone to start over.

Reward effort

Why would anyone want to try something new that might make them look foolish or incompetent if they didn't have to? Any form of reward or recognition for the effort of trying will make implementing change easier and more successful.

When someone begins the process of learning a new piece of software, give them a button or t-shirt that says something light and recognizes their effort. "I tried the new inventory system and survived!"

At each step along the way provide some sort of reward or recognition for progress as well as completion. Even a simple thank you can go a long way. When an individual, group or team completes the transition, celebrate their success.

A real-world example

When the former McClellan Air Force Base in Sacramento was repairing jet aircraft, they

struggled to train the mechanics at the base. As the engines became more complex, training the mechanics became more difficult.

With a single engine costing millions of dollars, most were afraid to touch one for fear they might ruin it.

First they told the trainees "Don't worry, if you break it/ruin it/do it wrong, you won't be held accountable." The trainees were still reluctant to risk breaking such expensive equipment.

Then they were given broken engines to practice on, and that didn't work either. "What if I damage it beyond repair? Then it is just as bad as breaking a brand new engine."

Finally the instructors began using engines that could not be repaired and were destined to become scrap metal.

This had now become a true penalty-free environment -- there was no way a mechanic could do any damage that hadn't already been done. In fact, they even found new and innovative ways to repair some of the engines and salvaged many of them.

As your organization changes, so must the people in it, and most of us resist change.

New processes, skills, software and equipment create situations where individuals are not comfortable because they have little or no experience. You can overcome this roadblock by mastering the penalty-free environment.

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