

A Strategy to Boost Your Employee Training Results

By Ann N. Gatty, Ph.D.

As business leaders, we know the value of employee training programs. But, have you ever considered why some of these training programs are more successful than others? Yes, some programs may have more interesting content, or may have more engaging activities, but there is another reason for the success of an employee training program. It centers on how the information is presented and internalized by the participants. I rely on a learning model that was developed by a psychologist named Lev Vygotsky and his simple formula is easy to implement with any training program, once it is understood.

Lev Vygotsky, was an early 20th century Russian psychologist who developed a learning theory that when used in training can produce transformational results. To him learning is a social experience, and cannot be accomplished in a vacuum.

According to Vygotsky each individual masters new skills and information through interacting with a more skilled peer. There is a significant distinction between a person's cognitive capability and performance. Vygotsky clarified this perspective by using the concept of "assisted" and "unassisted" performance. Unassisted performance refers to what a person is able to do *without* the help of others. Assisted performance is what a person can do *with* assistance from others.

This is critical when designing effective employee training programs. We all like to motivate our workers, but motivation only goes so far. Motivation energizes you to do the best work you can, using the skills and knowledge you currently own. But what happens when you need the workforce to move outside that level of comfort and acquire new skills and knowledge? How do you help them comfortably and effectively move to the next level? Here is where Vygotsky's model can be easily applied.

Defining the Zone of Proximal Development:

Vygotsky theorized that an individual's *learning potential* is the region between the individual's capacity to perform a task without assistance and the capacity to perform with assistance. He used the term, Zone of Proximal Development to describe this fertile learning opportunity. He emphasized that what individuals can perform collaboratively or with assistance today, they can perform independently without assistance and competently tomorrow. Here is his definition:

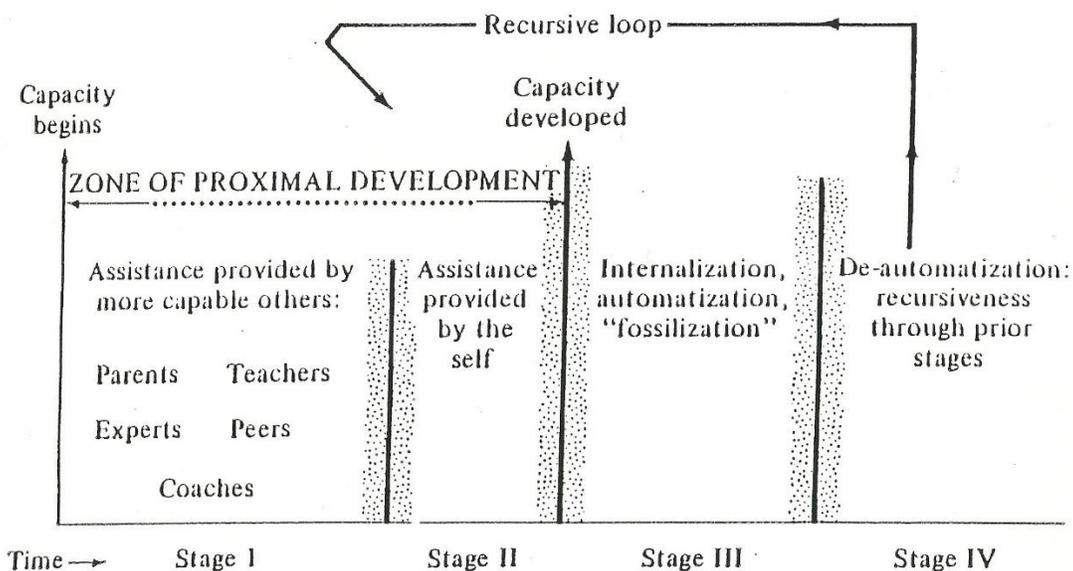
The zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers.

This description of learning sounds very academic, so let me explain in terms of application. The psychologist delineates 4 stages through which individuals pass as they master new knowledge and abilities. They are explained below, using the graphic as a reference.

STAGE 1: Where performance is assisted by more capable others

In Stage I, the facilitator’s task is providing sufficient assistance (through directions or modeling) for individuals to accomplish the task. They can complete the task because the facilitator provides as much assistance that is needed for the individuals to be able to comprehend how to accomplish the task. In other words, the assistance is external using the facilitator’s guidance. In any situation, the facilitator must select the appropriate activity and materials that meet the individual’s current ability level.

Four stages of the ZPD



STAGE 2: Where performance is assisted by the self

The transfer from external to internal control is accomplished when the individual assumes more of the responsibility to complete the task. The distinctive feature of the second phase is self-directed speech, in which the individuals accomplish the task by prompting themselves with comments previously supplied by the facilitator, whether in spoken words or just in thought. When a task can be accomplished without thinking, the individuals have emerged from the ZPD into Stage III.

STAGE 3: Where performance is developed, automatized, and “fossilized”

Here task accomplishment becomes automatic; no real thought is necessary. The individuals can complete the task without having to mentally remind themselves about each step of the process.

STAGE 4: De-automatization of performance leads to recursion back through the ZPD

What one formerly could do, one can no longer do. This de-automatization may be due to slight environmental changes or stress, or lack of use. The individuals may need to reference directions as a reminder or ask for assistance from a more capable peer as a way to refresh the memory.

What does this process look like in real life? Let's use the example of learning how you became proficient at tying shoes that have shoe laces.

Stage One: Your parent puts a pair of shoes on your feet and ties your shoes. That individual then unties the shoes and shows you the process of manipulating the laces to make a loop, circle the other lace around the loop and take the lace under the loop and create a second loop which when both loops are pulled tight creates a snug tie. Maybe my instructions are not the greatest, but you get the idea. All the while through the process, your parent is offering verbal directions that you can follow.

Stage Two: You practice tying the shoes remembering the instructions your parent has offered. You may be stating these instructions out loud or saying them to yourself. Regardless, you are now taking the control of guiding the process.

Stage Three: You can now tie your shoes automatically, maybe even attending to something or someone else as you tie the shoes. You need no help, no self-guidance.

Stage Four. If for some reason, you need to be reminded of the shoe tying process, you can be retaught. This might occur if you experience a physical or mental challenge, but requires you to reprocess.

The usefulness of building a learning system based on the Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, is that the focus is always on helping the individual expand current ability levels, always starting from where they currently can easily perform without assistance and allowing the individual to completely master a task before moving on to a more advanced task. People learn at different levels and allowing individuals to feel comfortable in the process brings about the best results.

About the Author:

Dr. Ann Gatty is a business learning expert. She helps her clients build businesses to work brilliantly. Through a collaborative mentoring process, she and her clients create workable strategic business plans and success initiatives, while improving their workplace processes. She is frequently featured in the media and contributes blog posts for www.AllBusiness.com and www.WomenOnBusiness.com. Her interactive speaking engagements assist participants in discovering new-found talents and skills that they can immediately apply in the workplace. Watch her video series, [Building Businesses to Work Brilliantly](#) for more business strategy tips.

