

Being At Our Best: How to Learn in the Wild



This article focuses on a huge challenge to being at our best as leaders: how to learn “in the Wild” (1)—that is, in actual day-to-day worklife where we face a persistent storm of complexity and stress.

Responding effectively is not a sum of skills we have learned. It is about how, moment-to-moment, we process and learn from our emotions, our thoughts, and the organizational context.

Countering the assault of the wild

Competing demands can wear down self-esteem and our ability to learn. A leader who recently completed a small group learning experience, told me: “I can be hard on myself in assessing my leadership abilities. It is comforting to know that my colleagues, who I respect enormously, struggle with the same things.”

To counter the assault of the wild requires a strong habit of thinking about work situations in a steady and systematic way. Here is an example of such reflective practice in action.

Learning in the wild

A leader came to me for consultation after struggling for months with a manager who reports to her whose authoritative behavior had been alienating her team. The overwhelm of work usually got in the way of taking time with the manager to give feedback. Brief attempts at feedback that were fit in whenever the leader could do it went nowhere. The leader would at times feel she herself was bad at leadership or like the manager just needed to be fired.

Over 30 minutes, as the leader and I talked, the noise of the Wild receded into the background. With guidance, the leader got back in touch with how much this manager’s behavior was hurting her team. That renewed her motivation and determination to intervene.

With facilitation, she gradually rediscovered her own principles about giving feedback. The best words to use with the manager then just spontaneously occurred to her. The next day, she took action and, with steady attention, the manager’s performance improved.

In this case, as happens sometimes, the impact of the Wild was so tenacious that outside help was needed for successful situational reflection. But, you can do a lot on your own. Below are links to additional resources to help develop your reflective practice.

Holding the line between our worst and our best

How could this skilled leader seem to forget things as basic as her motivation or how to give feedback? The Wilds of organizational life make it difficult to stay in touch with our own wisdom.

That 30 minutes of reflection time saved the leader from even more months of being stalled or from taking extreme action by abruptly firing her manager. Just a bit of reflection time may be the difference between being causing unnecessary harm and being at our best.

Reference

- (1) David V. Day **The Difficulties of Learning From Experience and the Need for Deliberate Practice** *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 3: 2010

Additional resources to develop your practice:

- [Subscribe](#) for free monthly articles and you will have access to a **Resource Guide**.
- Think about joining the [Four Week Challenge](#) on March 25 for \$99.
- [Contact me](#) for a free exploratory meeting to look at options.

About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. helps strengthen and enhance the impact of individual leaders, leadership teams, and consultants (e.g. quality consultants and improvement advisors) in the midst of work in order to create environments which foster learning, motivation, well-being, and performance.

He is adept at assisting leaders in using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult, as an opportunity to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress toward results. This approach can be applied to any current work but is especially effective in the midst of quality or innovation initiatives.

He has developed these approaches through more than 30 years as an organizational leader, speaker, consultant, and coach. His clients have included the Peterson Center on Healthcare, Health Quality Partners, and the Harvard Medical School Center for Primary Care. He has served as faculty and improvement advisor over 15 years for multiple initiatives for the Institute for Healthcare Improvement in Boston, Massachusetts and was previously Medical Director of Clinical Improvement at Group Health Cooperative (now part of the Kaiser system) in Seattle, Washington.

You can learn more on his website at neilbakerconsulting.com.