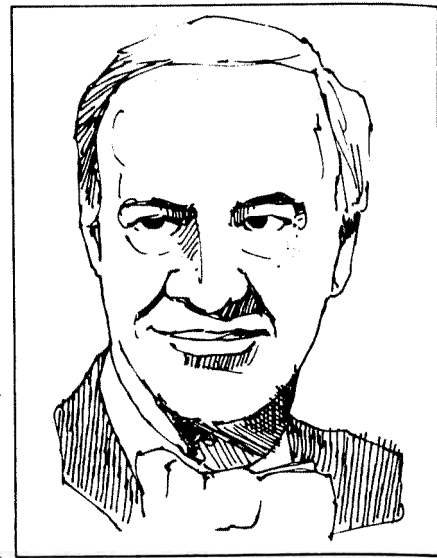


MALCOLM KNOWLES ON . . .



"HOW DO YOU GET PEOPLE TO BE SELF-DIRECTED LEARNERS?"

A number of people have written to me in reaction to previous columns asking me to go into a little more depth regarding my experience — especially in industry — in helping people to become self-directed learners. The main question comes out as "How do you get them to become self-directing, when their expectation is that they will be taught?" Then there are usually some sub-questions: (1) Do people really want to be self-directing? (2) Is everybody capable of being a self-directed learner? (3) Is self-directed learning the best form of education in all situations? (4) Does top management, with its emphasis on accountability for results, buy into it? (5) Are all trainers capable of learning to be facilitators of self-directed learners? (6) Are learning contracts an essential ingredient of self-directed learning?

Let's take care of the sub-questions first and then get to the main question.

As to number one, the answer is that adults *are* self-directed when they undertake to learn something on their own. In his extensive investigation of adult learning, Allen Tough — *The Adult's Learning Projects*, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, 1979 — has found that self-directed learning is a normal and universal activity among adults. But he found that often they don't consider what they have learned outside of an educational institution as being "education." When he

asked his subjects, "Have you learned anything during the past year?", a frequent response was, "No, I haven't attended any classes." But when he probed into whether they were doing anything different this year, they were able to describe an average of eight major learning projects in which they took the initiative to find resources — material and human — from which they could learn something.

There is growing evidence that adults do want to be self-directing — in fact, that they have a deep psychological need to be self-directing. We become adult psychologically when we come to perceive ourselves as being essentially responsible for our own lives. And at that point we develop a deep psychological need for others to perceive us and to treat us as being self-directing organisms. This creates a problem for us in adult education in general and training in particular. For adults come to us with years of conditioning in their previous school experience to perceive the role of "student" as being a dependent role. Consequently, although they may be self-directing in every other role in their lives — as worker, spouse, parent, citizen, and leisure-time-user, the minute they walk through a door labeled "education" or "training" they put on their dunce hat of dependency, sit back, fold their arms, and say, "OK, teach me." In fact, they put a lot of pressure on us to treat them as children be-

cause that is their preconception as to what education is. If we give in to this pressure and start treating them as dependent learners we put them into conflict between this intellectualized conception of the role of learner and their deeper psychological need to be self-directing.

And how do people deal with psychological conflict? Typically by trying to flee from it — which in education we call "resistance to learning" or "poor motivation." Hence the importance of helping adults make a transition from seeing the role of learner as a dependent role to seeing it as a self-directing role, which is what the main question is about.

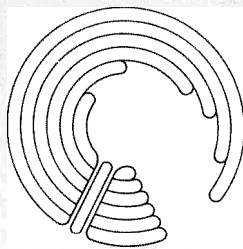
About sub-question number two, I suppose that there are some people who are pathologically dependent, but if so, they are more likely to be found in mental institutions than in work places. I must confess that I have been almost at the point of giving up a few times, but I have yet to meet anybody who hasn't been able to take at least some responsibility for directing his or her own learning. My assumption is that if we fail, it is more likely to be our fault than theirs. We still have much to learn about how to help people acquire the concepts, attitudes, and skills required for effective self-directed learning.

As for sub-question number three: No, self-directed learning is not the best form of education in all situations. If I had been a passen-

ger on the Titanic, I would not have wanted the captain to have me construct a learning contract specifying how I would learn what to do in case we hit an iceberg. I believe that straight indoctrination is an appropriate form of education in some situations — particularly where protection of human life is involved. And I believe that in other situations direct didactic instruction is appropriate, especially when learners are being introduced to totally new and strange learning territories — such as how to operate a machine they have never seen before. But whenever more complex human performances are involved, especially those requiring judgment, insight, creativity, planning, problem solving, self-confidence, and the like, then I think that self-directed learning is appropriate.

Regarding number four, it is my observation that top management is buying into self-directed learning fairly generally for management development and organizational development, increasingly for supervisory development, and reluctantly for basic skills training. And, given the present state of our technology in self-directed learning, this descending order of support is probably realistic. But if Alvin Toffler is on the beam in his new book, *The Third Wave*, top management will become increasingly supportive of self-directed learning: "What Third Wave employers need, therefore, are men and women who accept responsibility, who understand how their work dovetails with others', who can handle ever larger tasks, who adapt swiftly to changed circumstances and are sensitively tuned in to the people around them." (*The New York Times Magazine*, March 9, 1980, p. 25).

Now for number five: Yes, I believe that all trainers are capable of learning to be facilitators of self-directed learners. To do so, they must first understand how adults learn and how learning is different from being taught. This can be accomplished simply by a little reading: K. Patricia Cross, *Accent on Learning* (Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1976); J.R. Kidd, *How*



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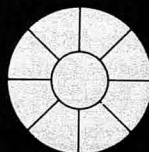
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Adults Learn (Association Press/Follett, Chicago, 1973); and my own *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* (Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1978). Then they must acquire a different system of psychic rewards. In place of getting their kicks out or *controlling* learners they must experience the joy that comes from *releasing* learners — from seeing the energy that is released when learners get turned on to learning, from working on their own learning projects. This happy result is accomplished the first time they decide to experiment with facilitating self-directed learning. Finally, they need to develop a new set of skills that can't be described in the remaining space in this column, but that are spelled out in my little paperback book, *Self Directed Learning: A Guide for Learners and Teachers* (Association Press/Follett, Chicago, 1975), Part II.

Finally, number six: No, learning contracts are not essential ingredients of self-directed learning, but they are the most effective devices I have yet discovered for helping learners organize their learning in a systematic, individualized, self-paced, structured way. None of Tough's self-directed learners actually used learning contracts; but if they had, their learning would have been more efficient and more effective.

And now back to the main question: How do you get people to be self-directed learners?

Let's start with a *don't*. You don't just throw them into the strange waters of self-directed learning and hope that they can swim. This is a new experience for most people, and they need some preparation for it. Always before they have been told by someone else — a teacher or trainer — what they are going to learn, how and when they are going to learn it, and if they have learned it. The idea that they are going to have to take some responsibility for making these decisions for themselves usually induces a high level of anxiety. So I always open a self-directed learning activity with an orientation session.

My orientation sessions vary

from an hour or two for a one-day workshop, to three or four hours for a one-semester course, to three or four days for a long-term supervisory- or management-development program. The same components are present in all three designs, the difference in time being accounted for by the depth to which they go in each component. The components of the design are:

1. *A relationship-building, climate-setting exercise.*

I introduce this exercise by explaining that learning is facilitated by a climate in which participants see themselves as mutual helpers rather than as competitors, in which there is mutual trust — among the learners and between the learners and the trainer, in which people feel safe and supportive rather than threatened and rivalrous, and in which everyone feels respected. I ask them to form small groups of from four to six participants each and share these things about themselves in each group:

- *What they are* (in Martin Buber's terms, their It-It relationship) — their present work roles and previous experience.

- *Who they are* (Buber's I-Thou relationship) — namely, one thing about themselves that will enable others to see them as unique human beings, different from everyone else in the room.

- Any special resources which are relevant to this course or workshop — gained through previous experience or study — that would be useful for others to know about.

- Any concerns, problems, curiosities, or issues that they are hoping to be dealt with in this program.

I role model what I expect from them by giving this information about myself. When I sense that the groups have completed this task I invite one or two members of each group to summarize what he or she learned about the other members of the group.

2. *A cognitive map of self-directed learning.*

This is a short presentation summarizing the main findings of

recent research about the characteristics of adults as learners, namely that (a) they have a deep psychological need to be self-directing, (b) they bring into any learning situation resources from their previous experience and training that is a rich resource for one another's learning, (c) they are task-centered, problem-centered, and life-centered in their orientation to learning, and (d) they are intrinsically motivated to learn, given the right conditions and encouragement. I emphasize that what people learn through their own initiative they usually learn more effectively and retain longer than what is imposed on them by others.

3. *Skill-practice exercises.*

After explaining that a different set of skills is required for self-directed learning from those required in learning from a teacher, I engage the participants in one or more exercises designed to develop such skills as diagnosing your own needs for learning (for example, the ASTD's "Professional Development: A Self-Development Process for Training and Development Professionals"), reading a book proactively, interviewing experts, giving and receiving help, and the like.

4. *Constructing a learning contract.*

After I explain how to go about constructing a learning contract I have each participant draft a mini-contract for some simple objective, such as improving my ability to make a public speech, and then share their contracts in groups of three or four.

One final note: I have found that as a group of people get launched into a self-directed learning process it greatly enhances the chances of long run payoffs if they are organized into informal "learning networks" of from three to six persons to give one another continuing support. — *Malcolm S. Knowles.*

Malcolm Knowles is a consultant and president of Knowles Enterprises, Raleigh, NC. He provides consultation and workshop leadership to corporations, associations, universities and government agencies.

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