



Management and Performance Associates – November 2005

Stretch Zone

In case you have never paid attention to a flight pattern between take off and reaching the final cruising altitude, take advantage of your next flight to recognize these movements and also to realize the correlation between the first moments of a flight and the learning process for your staff.

After taking off, you can observe that the plane stabilizes and stays level for a while at a pre-set altitude before reaching a stable cruising altitude. Then, it goes up to another pre-established level and stays there for a while. These movements are repeated until the cruising altitude is reached. The larger the plane, the easier it is to recognize these movements. Also, large planes take longer to reach cruising altitude.

The reason for this climb in steps is easily understood. The plane is heavier during take off and air density is reduced at higher altitudes. When stabilizing at intermediate altitudes, the plane loses weight by burning fuel, and therefore creates conditions for a safe flight to higher altitudes.

This principle is perfectly applicable to the process of developing people.

To develop people means to take them out of their comfort zone and into the stretch zone (creative tension).

In other words, developing a person means challenging him/her to execute a task or to reach a goal for which the person's current competencies are not enough to achieve the expected results. In order to achieve success, this person will need to meet the following conditions: develop new skills, acquire new knowledge, and act in a different manner.

Let's understand "comfort zone" in this context as the situation in which the person possesses all competencies to execute his/her activities, without requiring any improvement or development effort. Simply, performing this activity represents no challenge to this person.

The creative tension zone (or the stretch zone), by definition, represents a positive tension which works as a source of energy to look for new competencies or to improve existing ones. One can promote this tension zone by establishing a challenge and making it feasible.

Be careful. If we demand too much in this learning process we risk placing our employee in the panic zone, instead of the creative zone (stretch).

Similar to the plane which needs to create conditions to fly higher in a safe manner, people also need to gradually develop the competencies, which will safely take them to higher plateaus.

Therefore, when conducting development processes, remember to:

- ▶ Jointly establish realistic developmental priorities. Don't expect someone to learn and be fluent in German, Mandarin and Russian in only three months.
- ▶ Clearly signal accomplishments and progress toward goals, so the person can obtain the emotional and motivational conditions to keep moving. This is the moment the person recognizes that he/she is capable of moving to a higher level in his/her developmental journey.



- ▶ Take advantage of inevitable steps back to identify and internalize the lessons brought by this experience.

See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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