**Summary:** Do leopards change their spots? A cynical manager will probably say NO – if someone doesn’t perform, I will find someone else who does. An optimistic manager will probably say YES most of the time. A professional manager will probably say IT DEPENDS on who is involved and what it is you want to them to do. This article will offer some practical insights for the professional manager in answering this question.

Who is the ‘leopard’ we want to change?
Every person is unique and everyone learns differently. Some are good at learning some things (e.g. working with people) and useless at learning other things (e.g. using a computer). And everyone learns in a different way. Kolb\(^1\) helped to build the foundations of experiential learning and change. He made a distinction between four styles of learning: those who like to learn by doing tangible and practical things (concrete thinkers); those who like to look back and extract learning from their experiences (reflective thinkers); those who like to learn about ideas, theories and concepts (abstract thinkers); and those who like to learn from experimenting with different ideas and approaches (experimenters). We all have a mixture of these four styles of learning but most of us favour a mixture of two to suit our personalities. When someone says “don’t let’s talk about it, let’s do it and see what happens until we get it right”, we have the response of the experimenter-concrete thinker. When someone says “let me think more about it and draw my own conclusions” we probably have a response from a reflective-abstract thinker. (see diagram – Experiential Learning). Different organizations favour different kinds of learning. Different organizations also have different learning cultures. A university favours those who can work with abstractions and concepts (Reflection-Abstraction). Although some faculties may introduce field work and laboratory work to help convert ideas and concepts into practice, this still remains laboratory work. Business organizations favour what works in practice (Experimenting-Concretizing) and tend to have much less interest in concepts.

The challenge we have is how to get ‘leopards’ to change their spots when all these ‘leopards’ are so different. According to Kolb, all these different styles of learning are incomplete. The most effective kind of learning, is that which uses this whole learning cycle (see diagram). We learn about a subject (e.g. the concept of “delegation”). We test it out (e.g. experimenting with the concept of “delegation” to see if it is going to work and is worthwhile). We actually apply it in our own work situation (e.g. concrete application of “delegation”). We reflect on our experience to draw out what we have learned (e.g. reflecting on our experience of “delegating”). We then formulate our own conclusions from these reflections (e.g. our own internalized concept and understanding of “delegation”). No matter where we start this cycle, we need to complete it to get maximum learning and change in what we do. This full use of the experiential learning cycle can change what we do. Even if our spots on the outside look the same, we have will have changed on the inside and this will affect what we do.

How does this learning cycle apply to getting people to change?
If we want to see changes in our performance/behaviour, we need to use this WHOLE LEARNING CYCLE. Yet we are overwhelmed with all the conceptual information coming at us in words and pictures - from the internet and elsewhere. This is all abstract conceptual stuff which rarely moves on to complete the experiential learning cycle. Our educational system, with its focus on acquiring knowledge and information is measured through a pencil-and-paper examination system which also doesn’t move beyond concepts. We walk away with certificates which tell

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\(^1\) Kolb D, Experiential Learning, Prentice Hall, 1984
others what we have learned in our heads – what we have ‘understood’ conceptually. We have become “clever” in
talking about the concrete reality, but our ability to “do” it in the real world of performance and delivering the
goods may never happen. An MBA engineering graduate once said to me, “I can’t see why we have to learn joint
problem solving because once we know how to do the job, joint problem solving is common sense. We just do it”. A
subsequent unfamiliar problem solving exercise, where his expertise and previous knowledge did not provide the
answers, showed that when we encounter an unfamiliar problem, we resort to testing our own theories (concepts)
and tend ignore the concrete facts/data. This charming, personable, and clever young man had to think again about
what he had said.

How well do we move from “good ideas” to “good practice”?

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Four levels of learning</th>
<th>Learning the discipline of Joint Problem Solving</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Level D learning</strong> (ABSTRACT): Recognizing the concept and distinguishing it from other concepts</td>
<td>If we are learning JPS (the concept) we will read about it, discuss it and, if we have been well taught, we will be able to recall the definition of it in our own words. But all we have learned is the language of JPS and perhaps have a picture in our minds of what is distinctive about it. But these words are no more than conceptual generalizations in our heads converted into words. We can talk the talk. We have academic knowledge. <strong>This is to understand what it means.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Level C learning</strong> (EXPERIMENT): Testing different examples of the concept to find out which examples will work best.</td>
<td>If we are learning JPS (the concept) we may have gone a bit deeper and be able to illustrate the differences between good and poor examples of JPS. But these are only examples from elsewhere. They not from our own personal experience. They are not real-life happenings which we encounter. <strong>This is to recognize and compare examples.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Level B learning</strong> (CONCRETIZE): This is first-hand external recognition of the concept in action.</td>
<td>Here we have first-hand experience of others doing or not doing good JPS. We may be able to watch and comment accurately on actual behaviour and performance of others and give them accurate feedback. But we are still only commentators on reality. We may, for example, be in the middle of a joint problem solving discussion with colleagues, yet fail to recognize that we, ourselves, are into a JPS discussion and lapse into the same flaws we so easily see in others, but fail to see them in ourselves. <strong>This is to recognize in the real-life behaviour of others.</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Level A learning</strong> (REFLECTON): This is constructively reviewing ‘how well’ we are applying the concept we have learned so that we can do it better.</td>
<td>We can then move into getting close to home – into <strong>our own concrete behaviour</strong> and draw our own individual conclusions from reflecting and owning what we have learned about ourselves. We reflect on our own personal experience and start drawing conclusions about ourselves and formulating our own personal learning and the changes we need to make. This leads us back into recycling our learning from levels D to level A - starting the experiential learning journey all over again. <strong>This is to recognize and rectify it in our own behaviour.</strong></td>
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**So what do you do if the leopard won’t change its spots?**

Well whether you are getting the “leopard” to learn to apply JPS or some other subject/task, there will always be some blockages to learning and change. Unless we identify and remove these blockages, people won’t move from level D learning (safest since all we have to do is remember definitions and use the right words) to level A learning (most threatening since our personal performance may expose our inadequacies).

Here are 18 questions which will give you some leads to identify these blockages:

1. Have you clearly defined the subject/task at hand? 2. Is the person familiar with the task/subject? 3. Have you identified the specific aspects which are unfamiliar to them? 4. Is it non-threatening to them – it won’t intimidate them, lower their self-esteem, isolate them, or ‘put them down”? 5. Will it satisfy their particular needs and talents? 6. Have you communicated the pay-off for them? 7. Have you successfully negotiated their motivational barriers? 8. Is it still a viable and attractive alternative for them? 9. Have they bought into the value of it for themselves? 10. Are the practical (back-home) implications clear? 11. Having understood the practicalities, do they still want to learn and do it? 12. Will it still offer a pay-off for them? 13. Have they had the chance to DO it, with guidance if necessary? 14. Have they had affirmation and digestible feedback? 15. Has this feedback helped them to learn and change? 16. Is it clear how they will apply this in their own environment? 17. Have the appropriate adjustments been made to enable them to apply it in their own environment? 18. Will their real-life environment support and encourage them to learn and do it?

Target these 18 questions at someone you would like to see cope with a new task, or learn to do it better, then check yourself out before you call them a “leopard that won’t change its spots”.

HJM

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