

HOW PEOPLE *Really* LEARN

Beth Summers, Ph.D.

Think back to your first job—to the first year of your first job. What new skills did you have to master in order to succeed? What was the single most valuable lesson you learned that year? How are you using that insight today?

Now, recall how you learned that most valuable skill. Most likely, you learned it on the job (as opposed to taking a class or reading a book.) Did you have a role model? Someone you admired and wanted to emulate? Someone whose mistakes you decided to avoid? Or were you among the few who had a boss whose assignments were just beyond your comfort zone?

One of my first work experiences was an entrepreneurial venture. I was a college student, and I started a catering business to pay my way through school. I had the technical skills I needed—planning, cooking, and time management. I also had business savvy. I found a price point that allowed me to pay my bills and offer my clients a below-market rate. I had plenty of customers.

I expected that my success as a caterer would depend almost entirely on my own creativity—appealing presentation, exotic hors d'oeuvres, etc. I was sure wrong!

What I learned during my first year as a caterer has become part of me. What was most important to my clients was making a good impression on their guests. Quality was not as important to them as quantity; food was not as important as liquor. My most important job was to keep the libations flowing. My *raison d'être* was to preserve my clients' reputation as bountiful hosts.

In 25+ years of coaching business people—some of whom were hanging on to their jobs by the skin of their teeth—I've had to deliver some pretty tough feedback. Knowing that everyone needs to save face has been crucial in building trust with clients—a process that must happen fast.

¹ Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger *Eighty-Eight Assignments for Development in Place* (Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership 1989), 3-5

What was the most valuable skill you learned in the first year of your first job?

The answers I hear invariably converge around interpersonal and organizational savvy—how to work with other people to get the most important work accomplished with the least amount of friction.

How did you learn it?

Adults use a variety of learning approaches. Senior executives have their own preferred methods. They thrive on challenge. If you aspire to a senior leadership role, chances are you do too.

In a landmark research study about how executives develop the skills needed to run major corporations, Lominger co-founders Michael M. Lombardo and Robert W. Eichinger found that certain on-the-job experiences—via new job roles and/or development-in-place assignments—figure prominently in the development of people who go on to become top executives.

The “Eleven Challenges Common to Developmental Experience” which they outline paints an interesting picture. Projects that are developmental typically force the “learner” to work with new people and solve unfamiliar problems. Such assignments also tend to be highly visible, time-bound, and with measurable results.¹

The next time you create a development plan—for yourself or a subordinate—bear in mind that developmental assignments are often “two-fers.” A problem that is merely annoying for a seasoned leader can be a welcome challenge to a rising star. Added benefit: these projects are often cost-free.

BETH SUMMERS helps top-tier corporations in every industry develop learning agile leaders. She has held executive positions at Fortune 100 giants Apple, Dell, and Frito-Lay and spent equal time as a consultant. Beth's broad perspective and her talent for individually-tailored one-on-one coaching make her an invaluable resource for her clients, many of whom have been with her for 10 years or more.