



Stanford eCorner

Why It's Called the S-Curve

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Leadership educator and author Liz Wiseman explains how “ignorance can drive top performance.” She charts the challenging path of learning from ignorance and an awareness of being inexperienced, to an openness to learn from any source, and finally, contributing and the ability to teach others.



Transcript

So the learning curve starts right here in the phase of ignorance. This is ignorance is bliss and we are saying to ourselves as we're given something important and hard - hey, how hard can this be, I can do it. Because what do we see in this phase? We see this little gentle ascent. But then very quickly we start to dig into this and we go into the awareness phase where we realize no, actually, this is hard. And we're starting to see this ascent, this curve, a little steeper. But what we're really seeing is a gap between what we can do and what the people around us can do. And what are we saying to ourselves in this moment? And feel free to give it to me unfiltered. Audience Member Consciously incompetent. Liz Wiseman Yeah, now, I am consciously incompetent. Which it is way more fun to be unconsciously incompetent, isn't it? Yeah, we don't like dwelling in our ignorance.

What are we saying to ourselves? Oh, shoot. Yeah, we start to swear, and this is why I think they call it the S-curve, right? Because we start to use swear words. Then we move very quickly into the state of desperation. We start to panic, and we're looking around for there's got to be someone who knows what they are doing here who can help me. And this is where we start to reach out, this is where the most powerful form of learning happens, because the most powerful learning isn't ever in the classroom, it's not because someone gave us a curriculum, told us to take these classes or as you join the company and they give you competence models and tell you these are the courses that you need to take. The most powerful form of learning comes when we're desperate, when we have no choice but to learn, when it's more painful not to learn than it is to just scramble up this steep learning curve. Then we move into the stage when we contribute, because we have got no points on the board up until this point, and then we need to put some points on, we put them on fast. And sometimes when we contribute, we contribute really big. What we found in the research is that when we compare how veterans versus rookies, experienced people versus inexperienced people perform, we find that across broad industries as you might expect, people who have experience outperform people with inexperience, but by a small margin. It was remarkably small.

However, when we cut that data in the knowledge industries, we found that people with inexperience tend to outperform people with experience also by a small margin. But where they really outperform is when the work is innovative in nature, and they outperform in speed. Actually, rookies are a lot faster than people with experience. It's because they are desperate, because they are desperate. And then after a contribution, we start to get comfortable. This is where we start to teach other people and we mentor other people. And if we're not careful, we continue to see this line of performance and contribution and learning continuing at this steep ascent, and it feels good. But in reality, we start to settle in and we get comfortable.