

GIVING ONE PAUSE

Learn how cultivating humility can drive success, even in the most time-, budget-, and attention-stressed workplaces.

By Nance Guilmartin



What if learning to be a successful leader in today's demanding, 24-7 world begins with the confidence to publicly acknowledge what you don't know you don't know?

That's what I often ask decision makers, learning professionals, managers, and people who are responsible for providing direction. I invite them to step up to the plate with a more powerful mindset: to see the practice of humility as a strength that allows others to be their best.

Exercising that mindset is a challenge in today's workplaces, where demands for change can trigger a cascade of reactions to quickly solve the problem.

We're dealing with

- **tighter budgets** limiting training staff, space, equipment, and training time
- **unrealistic expectations** that the training will change behavior overnight
- **distracted audiences** pulled in many directions on multiple deadlines
- **knee-jerk reactions** to symptoms followed by demands for instant answers
- **less patience** to spend time uncovering the root causes in a "just-do-it" environment
- **increased job insecurity** when you're still expected to deliver results.

In the face of these challenges, the natural tendency is to push forward. However, there is a counterintuitive approach that will enhance effectiveness.

It's called a "pause."

Yes, it's hard to pause when you don't think you have the time. Yes, it's hard to pause when you think the problem is obvious. Yes, it's hard to pause when a lot of people are upset and complaining. Yes, it's hard to pause when taking people offline to train them threatens to cause more problems.

These are cues that it's time to pause, even when you don't think you can or don't think it's necessary. Given the pressure to help your organization succeed, it takes presence of mind and humility to pause and, for example, ask organizational stakeholders, "What result do you really want, and will this training truly address the source of the problem?" It takes courage to ask questions such as, "Do I have the flexibility and personal humility to stand up for what it will take to deliver

lasting, positive results?” But that’s what the learning professionals at one organization I was working with were able to do when they were about to react to a problem. Here’s how the story unfolded:

The informal way in which the phones were being answered did not meet the high standards for courtesy and effectiveness sought by the new CEO, nor by the organization’s increasingly savvy, time-pressed customers. In the past, anyone picking up the phone could answer the caller’s question or find someone who could.

The questions weren’t exceedingly complicated, the organization wasn’t that large, and the customers weren’t demanding instant answers or complaining loudly. Suddenly, the vice president of human resources was in the hot seat when the CEO called to say, “This is a serious problem. I want you to develop a customer service training program and get started right away.”

As a trainer, you’d normally develop a script and ask people to follow it. “Sounds simple enough,” you’d think to yourself as you start to design the program, run it by the department heads, and tell your training supervisor to set up the schedule. You would feel good that plans have rapidly come together, until a voice says to you, “Wait a minute. What if the problem isn’t the script or people’s attitudes?” That’s where the *power of a pause* can help avoid reactively trying to solve the problem at the level at which it was first expressed.

Humility is an onramp to drive more powerful change

Asking, “What don’t I know I don’t know?” is one of the effectiveness principles I set out in my book *The Power of Pause*. It takes humility and confidence on the part of a learning professional to reframe the ultimate solution—to go beyond the crisis-driven demand for training to solve what first appears to be a lack of skill or will. That is a moment of choice where this practice can help you lead the organization toward a more lasting, professionally rewarding, time- and money-saving direction. This is where

you can shift gears and become more effective—by having the humility to ask, “What don’t I know I don’t know about?”

The symptom behind the symptom?

What we didn’t know we didn’t know: We asked the participants to tell us real-world challenges that kept them from answering phones in the way they wished they could or didn’t realize was possible. They gave us a gold mine of feedback, which engaged them in shaping the training, and built invaluable trust during a time of change and pressure to “up their game.”

The unexpressed result that the supervisor and customers really expect?

What we didn’t know we didn’t know: The CEO wanted to enhance the reputation of the organization, not just have better phone service. Employees agreed that change was needed, yet they did not feel that the administration had taken the time to understand their multitasking pressures and technology challenges. Customers wanted faster access to accurate information to solve their problems or to take advantage of an opportunity.

The underlying problem? What we didn’t know we didn’t know: It turns out that people with the right answers weren’t available because their departments were short staffed; tougher economic conditions increased demand for help at the same time that increased services raised higher expectations; and answers weren’t simple and took extra time to provide. In short, the online, texting, and in-person queue never let up long enough to accept a transferred inside call, no matter how adeptly it might be made. The problem wasn’t just about answering the phones.

The sustainable solution? What we didn’t know we didn’t know: The solution wasn’t just to provide fast, courteous, professional phone reception service. It required a two-phased solution. First, we began a training program for 250 employees, who helped us refine the program along the way. Second, the longer-term solutions included an intranet-based information directory to identify and locate experts, better equipment, and a review of staffing to better accommodate high demand.

Applying the effectiveness equation

The organization got a real solution and achieved better outcomes by choosing to pause and ask what they didn’t know they didn’t know. They tapped into the impact power of humility and earned the trust of employees, who in turn helped create a better training program. Humility is a key principle in what I call an “effectiveness equation.”

You can cultivate effectiveness by applying the effectiveness equation:

$$\begin{array}{r} \text{pause (presence of mind)} \\ + \\ \text{curiosity} \\ + \\ \text{humility} \\ = \\ \text{professional effectiveness} \\ \text{and personal fulfillment} \end{array}$$

Humility is a key factor in this equation. The practice of humility—pausing to ask, “What don’t I know I don’t know”—provides a time-sensitive way to shift from driving decisions based on automatic reactions.

Training professionals know that achieving sustainable results requires more than plug-and-play tools; it requires getting beneath the symptoms. The pressure to quickly “do” something to address the problem may provide relief, but isn’t the game-changing equation needed to spark innovation, fuel creative collaboration or build trust that enables people to be their best in times of change and fast-moving opportunities.

Nance Guilmartin is an Emmy-winning speaker, executive coach, and educator working with training professionals and clients to increase communication intelligence and problem prevention. She is the author of *The Power of Pause: How to Be More Effective in a Demanding, 24/7 World* (Jossey-Bass, 2010); www.nanceguilmartin.com.

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