



CHANGE YOUR FOCUS CHANGE YOUR LIFE

Learning New Languages

By Silver Rose

One of the major benefits of learning how to dance with change is that it keeps your brain facile. In fact, Andrew Weil, M.D. in his book *Healthy Aging* recommends learning a foreign language (a BIG change for most of us) as a way to stave off the effects of aging on the brain, "You don't have to master it. Just the attempt to learn a language is like running different software through the brain. You're exercising more communication channels."

Well, there are the traditional foreign languages and there are the new languages we need to learn as we are adapting to changes. Some examples:

Learning how to speak the same language as your boss. Even if you are both fluent in the same language, it doesn't necessarily follow that you both attach the same meaning to words and phrases. My favorite example is the term "customer service." I continually tell managers that, if one of the results they want from their team is "excellent customer service" then it would serve them well to define what they mean by that. I have seen many problems arise when a team member delivers customer service according to his standards, which are quite different from those of his boss.

The same is true in home situations. We tell our kids "be good" as if they were born knowing what that means. When we define the criteria, there are fewer arguments because both child and parent can clearly see when something is done that doesn't fit the criteria of "be good."

Figuring out what all those darned acronyms mean. Many years ago I went to work for a computer software company in Marketing Intelligence (which the Sales team assured me was an oxymoron). For the first three months, whenever I attended a meeting and we were talking about the computerized sales system, I thought I'd landed in the bar scene of Star Wars where every creature spoke a dialect unfamiliar to my untrained ears. So many acronyms flew around the room, my head spun from trying to keep up.

Today it's IM and Twitter. I'm still trying to get everything straight. So far I have mastered LOL, BTW, :(and (: I'm still working on retweets, direct tweets and whether one's head could actually explode from the pressure of trying to be hip (and I suspect just using the word hip places me solidly out of contention).

Adapting to the culture. Most foreign language classes start with the basics which include good manners—how to say please, thank you and you're welcome. Beyond the words, it is important when you finally travel to the foreign country whose language you studied, that you also learn what good manners are within that specific culture. For example, in certain Mideast cultures, showing the bottom of your foot roughly translates to, "I consider you lower than the dirt on the ground." That faux pas would be difficult to recover from.

Learning what's acceptable at work is equally important and a moving target. The culture is in constant motion, responding to many factors: changes in the marketplace, employee turnover, new ownership, and mergers with other companies. It is a good practice to routinely raise your head up from your work to assess the culture you are in *now*. Too many of us decide how to approach our work based on the shape of the culture when we first joined the organization. Are you keeping up with the culture you're in? Do you know what's acceptable behavior? If you're not sure how to assess it, a quick way to start is by observing the behavior that gets rewarded and that which gets punished.

Learning to dance with change is an ongoing process. The more we use the steps (which we'll cover beginning in my New Year's column), the better dancer you'll become. Once you've learned the steps, the answer to how to get really good at the dance is contained in this old joke:

A New York City tourist stops a local on the sidewalk to ask, "How does one get to Carnegie Hall?" The local replies, "Practice, practice, practice!"

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