

## PATTERNS OF NEW LEARNING

### Some Mind Matters and Brain Business in New Endeavors

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I consistently hear my coaching students puzzle about why their clients stall or quit at about two months. Why does someone begin a new endeavor—such as coaching—with such excitement, then seem to lose it several weeks into the work? The possible answers involve both the mind and the brain, as well as familiarity with a map of development to understand this phenomenon.

#### *The Art*

New learning falls into four phases.

1. *Initial confusion* and excitement combine to launch new learning. Awareness of the unfamiliar and uncertain registers as curiosity, or even anxiety, mixed in with the excitement, propelling momentum.
2. *Increasing confidence* follows, both with the experience of effectiveness and with positive feedback.
3. *Mastery* is the consistent experience of effectiveness and movement to a new level of excitement, validation, and into its own self-sustaining “flow.”
4. *Entropy* occurs when the excitement and invigoration of the learning curve’s newness and mastery level off or decline. Even a leveling off may register as a lessening of the ever-increasing acquisition of mastery, pleasure, and rewards. Disillusionment may be introduced, with accompanying questions of why there is not more to this, why the increasing mastery and success have leveled off or waned.

#### *The Science*

The brain also plays a role in this process. Dopamine is the brain chemical that induces excitement by anticipating pleasure or reward. The rush from dopamine release motivates people to take risks. The risk is exciting, adding to the dopamine release. But neuroscientists have shown that anticipating a reward is even more exciting than actually receiving it. Why? Because receiving a reward actually shuts down the anticipatory release of dopamine, and along with it the accompanying positive feelings and high energy. This explains the paradox that the expectation of an event is more exciting than the actual event, as has been demonstrated in various arenas:

- An investor will feel more positive when expecting a stock to rise, yet feel less excited than he anticipated when it actually does rise.
- The purchase of a big ticket item—a new car—isn't as exciting as expected.
- Clients hit plateaus in coaching after one to two months.

In coaching we foster attitudes that both promote curiosity and openness as well as introduce new learning. Learning is always a choice, a potential creation. There are many different levels of learning, both internal and external.. And, learning does not always have to be converted into action or into a specific metric of success.

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