

Re-Learning to Ride a Bike – Without the Skinned Knees **By Barbara Dartt, Mother, DVM**

Now, I know you aren't ever supposed to forget how to ride a bike. And I have found that, these days (long after my first attempts), I am still able to ride a bike just fine – at least on smooth, flat surfaces. Recently, though, I had a chance to rediscover that the learning-to-ride part wasn't really as simple as I remembered.



This fall, Quinn, our five-year old son, announced that he wanted to learn to ride the two-wheeled bike. He'd declined our offers to help all summer but found when he began kindergarten that one of his closest friends could ride. Nothing like a little peer pressure to get you started! As he appealed to the family to show him how, I was picturing the pop culture images of learning to ride: a little push, a few falls and then, bingo – you're a pro!

In fact, Quinn did learn to "ride" within a half hour – he could keep it upright down the long, downhill driveway. However, his vision of bike riding was to join siblings and mom on a ride down our country road. Turns out that this level of proficiency takes quite a lot of practice. Not a surprise to you, perhaps, but it took me a bit of reminding and it severely stretched the five-year old's patience! And, not for the first time while working with my children, the application to management became apparent as I chased after the runaway kid and bike.

In agriculture, we often overlook training – it gets delegated to long-term employees or we expect children who've grown up on a farm business to have absorbed the "right" way to do something simply because they've lived here all their lives. Quinn's somewhat painful practice sessions reminded me of a few truths about training that apply whether you're working on a new skill with your child, on a never-before-tried task yourself or instructing an employee on their work.

Early Successes Build Confidence

We got Quinn started with a hand on the seat and gave him a gentle push downhill – gravity helped him build up some speed and stay upright. Turning was another matter altogether. At one point he made a gradual, looping turn off the driveway and onto the lawn. The good news was he didn't go into the road. The bad news was he couldn't navigate away from a pair of pine trees and got swallowed up by the branches! Despite a couple early scrapes (literally), repeated successful coasting down the gradual driveway hill built up Quinn's confidence and gave him the nerve to try more turns.

Consider this strategy as you instruct employees. Ask a few questions about previous experience and then hang around to answer questions and check on progress. Have the employee navigate the skidsteer around the driveway before sending him down the alley to scrape (and perhaps take out a gate or two). If he doesn't have the ability, give him some

time to get comfortable in a safe, wide open area before asking him to navigate the obstacle course.

It Takes a Mentor

A five-year old's infinite confidence is one distinction between a child's learning style and that of an adult's. I asked if he was ready for the Tour de France. "What's that?" he asked. "A big bike race that takes a couple weeks and goes up and down a mountain," I said. "Oh, yeah," he replied. "And I can ride faster than you, too!" This response was despite the fact that his most recent "turning" experiment had taken him out of the driveway, straight across the dirt road and into the weeds.

Left alone without a clear outline of expectations or boundaries, both new and seasoned employees could easily develop a process that doesn't follow your SOP or get confused about what their top priorities should be. Quinn shouldn't have been worrying about a professional race – he needed to master the fundamentals. Like turning. Expect employees to need follow-up and feedback to really understand their work. Make yourself available or encourage your manager/trainers to check in on learners – both you and the employees will be much happier with the outcome.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Getting the bike started under his own power has been the most difficult skill to learn – pedals have to be in the right position, the opposite foot needs to touch the ground and there must be enough momentum to keep the bike upright. I marvel at how easy it seems now to put all those skills together and as run back to my bike, knock back the kickstand and jump on to catch up with Quinn before he finds himself headed for the next ditch!

When you've ridden a bike for 20 years (or more), it's pretty easy to forget how much effort it took to learn. As a long-time member of your business, your learning curve on many tasks flattened out long ago. Be generous as you consider the need for repetition and time required for new learners to really understand their new duties.

Take a new look at training – I think it is an overlooked opportunity area in many businesses. By providing early opportunities for success, ensuring a mentor is available and allowing room for practice, I believe you can avoid some of the "skinned knees" of employee turnover and dissatisfaction.

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