

September Newsletter Feature Article

An Old Dog Learns New Tricks

By Anne Sedler

There is an impression among many that as we grow older, we lose brain capacity, our skills fade, and our judgment becomes clouded. The old expression, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," is an indication of this belief. As a society, we tend to think that seasoned workers are slower, less productive, and often not responsive to new ways of doing things. But I've often heard from even my younger clients that they can't change habits.

Let me tell you a little story that may make you think differently if you hold onto the "older worker is less productive" idea. Recently, I received a call from a very influential businessman who wanted my help. His dilemma: there was a staffing change that had taken place and, temporarily, he was without his administrative assistant. He had become frazzled because his files were poorly managed for many years and, on his own, he could not find what he needed in reasonable time. Additionally, he believed the paper clutter around the office was seriously affecting his productivity and his stress.

Mr. Smith (name changed to protect the innocent) wanted help purging files and paper clutter and setting up an effective filing system as well as a better way to accomplish critical work. The challenge was that the office had been in operation under Mr. Smith for more than 60 years with little or no file clean-out or effective document retrieval systems. Mr. Smith, now well into his 80's might have been viewed as a person unable to make significant changes. Frankly, I had doubts that changes would be accepted.

The reality is, Mr. Smith accepted and was a willing participant in monumental change in his office. He is now actively working on changing some bad habits, and has opened his mind to new ideas and tools where they apply and where they make a difference for him. But keep in mind that Mr. Smith -- a savvy, perceptive, and wise business leader -- kept his tried and true, effective office practices as they were. He clearly understands that if something isn't "broke," don't fix it.

So, you might be thinking, what makes Mr. Smith different from many others in his ability to make changes and remain productive even as an octogenarian? I observed Mr. Smith and read up about the brain and how we can affect our ability to improve over time. Here are a few personality and lifestyle traits that separate the Mr. Smiths of the world from the masses:

- They love their work and are able to see value in what they do.
- They are problem solvers and creative thinkers.
- They consistently learn about and try new things.
- They are goal setters.
- They value forming new relationships while maintaining old ones.
- Their lives are balanced with good work ethics and enriching, fun activities.
- They are ever-curious people.
- They actively and generously participate in their communities.

There is an old myth, believed by many, that we only use about 10% of our brains. But modern science shows the brain is far more flexible and has greater storage than a computer. The brain is fully capable, if utilized properly, of allowing us to increase our intelligence as we age. This is counter to traditional belief.

Look at a few of history's greatest geniuses: Albert Einstein, Thomas Jefferson, Sir Isaac Newton, William Shakespeare, and my personal favorite genius of all time, Leonardo da Vinci. Each one contributed great work to the world and actually gained productive momentum as they aged.

What could this mean to you? It means you are never too old to learn new ways of doing things and you can remain a valuable asset to your profession, your organization and your community, for a long time, if that is what you want.