

Learning to Survive at Burger King

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The sign outside the Burger King restaurant read, “Accepting Applications”. I was sixteen, a junior in high school and thought I was “way too cool” for fast food, but I needed a job. I thought I could endure the job for a little while, so I headed in and filled out an application. I was hired and started the next day.

My first day was spent watching numerous instructional videos on various subjects, ranging from, why I have to wash my hands and keep the place clean to the proper sandwich-making procedure. I remembered very little from the intensive video session and was very nervous when the manager led me back into the kitchen to start working my first position—the broiler. It seemed simple enough but I kept messing up. The people making sandwiches were taking the meat patties and toasted buns faster than I could keep putting them through the broiler. It was very stressful and I went home tired. I always thought fast food work was simple and that the employees were just “not so bright”; I guess I was wrong.

After I mastered the broiler I moved up to making sandwiches and continued on until I had learned every position in the store. During my first two months at Burger King I actually started to enjoy the job. I made friends with my coworkers and looked forward to going to work. I decided not to quit and continued working at Burger King throughout high school and I still work there now during breaks from college.

People often ask me, “How did you make it in the fast food industry without getting aggravated and quitting?” My usual answer is “Oh, it’s not that bad.” In this paper, I decided to specifically try and answer that question by reflecting back on how I learned to survive working at Burger King and how I helped others to learn also. To do

this, I will examine specific instances where learning occurred and discuss how they illustrate concepts discussed in education literature.

### Making the Job Fun

The restaurant manager has a great sense of humor and is always making her employees and customers laugh. One morning we ran out of regular coffee so we were serving decaffeinated coffee to the customers without telling them of the situation. I was working drive-thru with her that morning. Every time I handed out a cup of coffee she would comment as they drove away, "I'm sure that coffee will really wake them up!" I was laughing all morning. Instead of getting aggravated and stressed about the situation, she made it funny. After working with this manager for a while I started to follow her example of making everyday situations funny. According to Glasser (1986) there are five basic needs that motivate our actions: to survive and reproduce, to belong and love, to gain power, to be free and to have fun. Since I was having fun at the job, I was fulfilling one of my basic needs; therefore, the likelihood of me quitting was decreased.

### Helping Others Learn by Making the Job Fun

One Christmas when I was home from college working at Burger King, my manager asked me to think about a way that we could lower the drive-thru time. Reflecting back on the situation, I see that I used Roger von Oech's (1986) four roles (explorer, artist, judge, and warrior) to be creative and come up with an idea. Von Oech (1986) names and defines these roles in his book, *A Kick in the Seat of the Pants*.

#### *Explorer*

The Explorer looks for new ideas by looking at the problem from different angles and not throwing out any ideas (Von Oech, 1986). I looked for possible ideas by thinking

about how motivation was developed in other fields, for example sports. I thought about the idea of bringing competition into the drive-thru time dilemma.

### *Artist*

The Artist takes a concept and tries to “change it up” by making a joke out of it or looking at it upside down or backwards (Von Oech, 1986). I developed my idea by making a parody of it. I was joking with a coworker about the owner being stingy and giving us stupid prizes like Burger King pencils when we did something good. That got me to thinking, “Would the owner be willing to give a *cash* prize to the winner of a contest?”

### *Judge*

The Judge, being creative but not losing check with reality, evaluates the idea and decides to change it, keep it or throw it out (Von Oech, 1986). I thought about the drawbacks of my idea: the owner not wanting to give cash prizes and employees not wanting to participate. I also thought about the advantages of my idea: lowering drive-thru time and employees being excited about receiving cash prizes. I decided to go with it.

### *Warrior*

The Warrior puts the idea into action and then gives feedback to the other roles (Von Oech, 1986). I ironed out all the details of the competition and developed a plan to present and sell my idea to the owner. I was a little bit nervous, about actually talking to the owner because he always seemed condescending and aloof. It took a little prodding from my manager, but I finally went to talk with him. The owner loved the idea and it has been in place and effective at keeping drive-thru times low for two years now. Since

the idea worked, my Warrior gave positive feedback to all the roles. This encouraged the Warrior to take action more quickly next time.

Glasser (1986) feels that learning and fun go together and that things are boring when there is no learning taking place. The idea to make drive-thru fun and competitive fostered learning. Employees wanted to improve their drive-thru time so they began asking questions about how to improve. I was able to engage in learning conversations with my coworkers about how they could lower drive-thru time. This enabled us to reflect back on techniques we had been using and discuss ways to improve them. Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) suggest that reflecting upon past experiences is an excellent way to start a learning conversation. The authors go on to say that the learning conversation “is a sustained activity creating an increasing awareness of the whole experiential process of learning” (p.3).

#### *A Learning Conversation*

A co-worker and I discussed developing a system of unspoken communication. We decided that the person taking orders in drive-thru (the order-taker) would make the drinks, collect the money, hand out the drinks, hand out change and then ask if they would like condiments. The order-taker would then place napkins and appropriate condiments in the window. When the person bagging the food (the expeditor) came to the window he could see if napkins were in the window, if they were, than the expeditor would know immediately if the order was ready to go out and could do so. This eliminated the time consuming step of the expeditor trying to interrupt the order-taker and ask if the order was ready to go out the window. Through this learning conversation, we developed a procedure to lower the drive-thru time.

### Team Work

At Burger King, each employee plays an important role in getting quality food to the customer in a timely manner. For example, if the person putting meat patties in the boiler is not paying attention and does not have enough hamburgers in the steamer, it sets off the following: The sandwich maker must decide to either try to make something else while he or she waits, or help the person running the broiler catch up. Either decision will cause the expeditor (the person bagging the food) to not have the next sandwich they need. This will cause the person at drive-thru to be waiting on an order and that will cause an increase in the drive-thru time.

The game I developed using von Oech's (1986) four roles incorporated all Burger King employees who were on the clock. In the game there is an average time to beat for every four hours of the day. Each of these four hour blocks are labeled day-part 1, day-part 2, etc. Each person that is on the clock during a day-part where the time is lower than the set average is put into a drawing for \$50. The drawing occurs each week.

The teamwork developed through this game recognized the important role that each person plays in lowering the drive-thru time. Working in teams helps employees to fill another of Glasser's (1986) five basic needs, the need for belonging. Since the employees feel that they belong and are needed at Burger King they are less likely to choose to quit. After implementing this game, employees began conversing each other in order to develop ideas they had about how to help the team improve.

#### *A Learning Conversation*

Working together in a team encouraged front-line employees to have learning conversations (take orders and hand out food) with back-line employees (food

preparation). These two groups traditionally have conflict, but since they were working together towards a common goal, they discussed ideas about how they could better serve each other. From these learning conversations (Harri-Augstein & Thomas 1991), the employees decided that front-line should call-back any order that had three or more of one item so that the back-line would have a head start and so the front-line would not have to wait. Again, the employees were able to converse about past experiences and develop new ideas. In *Learning Conversations*, Harri-Augstein and Thomas (1991) say, “The greatest resource of learners is their own experience.” I think this was very true for the employees. They had a lot of ideas about how to improve but they just needed to engage themselves in reflective learning conversations to completely develop their ideas.

### Conclusion

This is in no way a complete discussion of the learning that occurs at Burger King, but instead an in-depth one. Reflecting back on my Burger King experience has allowed me to closely examine different situations in which I learned and helped others learn. By looking at these situations and applying the texts to them, it gives a greater understanding of the texts because the examples which I am applying the text to have great personal meaning.

## References

Glasser, W. (1986). Control Theory in the Classroom. New York: Harper & Row.

Harri-Augstein, S. and Thomas, L. (1991). Learning Conversations. London: Routledge.

Von Oech, R. (1986). A Kick in the Seat of the Pants. New York: Harper & Row.

## Self Evaluation

1. What did you learn in the process of doing this project?

In the process of doing this project I gained a greater understanding of the class reading assignments. I had to understand the readings in order to apply them appropriately. Also, by applying them to my own experiences I developed a greater sense of appreciation for the concepts because I could see how they worked in real life. I also learned that looking at past examples of different types of quality work is extremely helpful in developing my own piece of high quality work. I was able to expand my ideas by looking at how others expanded theirs.

2. What did you do that makes your project different from anything else you could find elsewhere?

This project is different from other works because it closely examines the learning that occurs in fast food restaurants. This is an area that is often over-looked because people think that fast food is “simple”. Also this project looks at learning something abstract, “learning to survive”, instead of looking at something concrete, learning to make *Whoppers*.

3. How did your project move you toward the goal of becoming more aware of how humans learn?

This project helped me develop a clearer picture of the ideas that the readings discussed. By applying the abstract ideas about how humans learn to concrete examples in my own experience, I was able to understand better why it was that the people in my examples were learning.

4. How does your project move you toward the goal of helping other learn to learn?

This project helped me learn more about how others learn to learn because I took an experience where I had learned and then helped others learn to learn and analyzed how and why it worked. Before doing this project I had been aware that I helped others learn at Burger King but I was not very clear on the specifics. By analyzing the how and why, I will be able to apply what worked to new learning situations and modify things that did not work.