

The Psychologist and the Light Bulb

Here's an old psychologist's joke: How many psychologists does it take to change a light bulb? The answer: Just one, but the light bulb has to *want* to change. Corny, but it sheds light on a serious question: Can people change?

As with the light bulb, it depends on how much the person is willing to do the necessary work. Sadly, the commitment is often not strong enough to make improvement stick. More people start diets than finish them. Having said that, it is truly awe-inspiring when you see someone who, faced with a serious weakness, buckles down and does the hard work change requires.

I think the best example I've seen of sheer determination to overcome a weakness was at Naval Air Station Memphis, Tennessee, in 1965. And it was done by an eighteen year-old named Billy Flynn.

Billy Flynn was born in a small town in Ohio. When he was eight years old, playing in his back yard, he heard a growling noise that started at the edge of his hearing and rapidly grew into a roar that was so loud he could feel it in his chest. Then a large airplane, a World War II fighter, flashed overhead. Staring in awe, Billy was hooked. From that point on all he wanted to do was learn about airplanes, and he wasn't interested in anything else.

Unfortunately, that included most of his school work. He struggled with his studies and early on was labeled a slow learner.

Nevertheless, Billy had a plan for after high school. He would join the Navy and choose aviation as his military occupation.

I met Billy Flynn on the first day of class in aviation maintenance school at Memphis. The first week of the twelve-week training course passed quickly and, on Friday, there was a test, as there would be each Friday for the next twelve weeks. Results were posted immediately. We all passed.

The next day, Saturday, a buddy and I decided to take a break from books and see what distractions Memphis had to offer. As we were leaving the barracks, I noticed Flynn studying in the dayroom.

“Hey Flynn,” I said, “Come on, let’s go to Memphis, see a movie, meet girls, have fun.”

“No,” Flynn said, “I’m not as smart as you guys. I have to study more than you do.”

“Come on Flynn,” I said, “You’re as smart as the rest of us. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t be here.”

“Actually,” he said, “My score on the pre-enlistment qualifying test was ten points below the average score and twenty points below the cutoff score for aviation training. I had to argue like heck just to get in here and it was made plain that I had only one chance. The first weekly test that I fail, I’m out of here. That will be the end of my aviation career. So you guys go on. I have to study.”

Feeling about one inch tall and red as a beet, I muttered something like, “Um, ok. Well, study hard. We’ll see you later,” and beat an embarrassed retreat out the door.

Fast forward twelve weeks: the last weekly test was scored and our class ranking was posted. Flynn, the underdog and the “dumbest” guy in class, was ranked number one, and by a large margin, beating out the rest of us “smart” guys.

What I learned from this was that having a “liability” is only going to hold you back if you allow it to. Grandpa was right when he said, “It’s not what you have, it’s what you *do* with what you have that counts.”

How does this story apply to each of us at work? When you see a person who looks good, but whose testing indicates a weakness in one area or another, help that person develop a plan to strengthen the weakness. He or she may turn out to be one of your best people.