Out With the Old and In With the New

On the basis of the title of this editorial, you may be thinking I am about a month late. After all, we rang in the new year at the stroke of midnight on December 31, 2009. This time, of course, we also rang in a new decade.

Yet, we do our spring cleaning sometime in March or April when we are transitioning from winter to spring. That is another time when we bring in the new and throw out the old. So, when do we deliberately put out the old (knowledge, books, practices) and bring in the new? My initial thought was that we do this on an ongoing basis. However, when we really examine the practice of out with the old and in with the new, we find that we don’t always carry through with the full intent. Let me give you an example.

My office is filled with books and journals. In fact, I am chagrined to say, books and journals are also stuffed in boxes, the closet, and the hallway storage cabinets. I started going through them recently and found that my tendency was to keep rather than toss. That practice of not doing the “out” part of the phrase did not prevent me from doing the “in” part. The new year is just beyond 1 month old and I have already added several books! (And this isn’t even counting what I put on my ebook reader!) In other words, I was merely adding (in with the new) rather than maintaining a balance (and out with the old). Unless you are doing historical research or planning to write an exposé, exactly how useful can those old documents be? My resolution is to trim my stash of books, journals, and files. (If you are thinking of just keeping such items on a computer, remember that electronics simply make retrieval easier; they do not really unclutter the place!)

All of this got me to thinking about the things we also have stored in our minds (e.g., quotes, facts, memories, pictures, conversion factors, where the nearest Starbucks is). In addition to these great memories and critical facts, we also have a bunch of trivia that really serves no purpose. We also have a lot of learning that was well ingrained in our professional development that is no longer relevant to anything.

One of our biggest challenges in continuing education is to help learners sort through the relevant and distinguish it from the irrelevant. New graduates frequently identify this issue. They may be reluctant to act because they don’t know if what they see or intuit is important or not. That distinguishing ability is one of the joys of becoming more competent in an area. We are better able to distinguish the useful from the trivial. Some of that ability to distinguish was garnered from conscientious practice. Other parts were deliberately forgotten because we made an effort to unburden ourselves of information that was not critical to our area of practice. Yet, we still retain a lot of useless knowledge. What have we done to promote forgetting? How do we help others gain the skill of “dis-remembering” the unimportant? How do we, ourselves, make this kind of change? What is the old we can throw out? These are questions among the challenges we face as we enter the second decade of the 21st millennium. Maybe by the third decade we will have the answers.

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