

No pressure, no diamonds: Leaning into taxing growth using challenge and support theory

Abstract

Challenges that expand the boundaries of one's comfort zone allows for new perspectives to be absorbed, which can lead to various degrees of growth within one's own self. While it is important to identify one's own strengths and champion them into everyday work, it is also important to identify the areas that we may not be fully knowledgeable/comfortable in. The presenter will invite participants into maximizing these areas of discomfort by illustrating how challenge and support theory looks like in practice through a graduate school anecdote.

Learning objectives:

As a result of this SA Speaks presentation, participants will be able to:

Participants will be able to reflect on how challenging tasks have contributed to the development of their personal/professional identity, and embrace the learning opportunities that come from them.

Participants will be able to reflect/mentally prepare for the challenging tasks that may be ahead of them as they enter the next endeavor of their life (graduate school, next year of college, future job).

Participants will be able to understand that graduate school is an experience that is designed to expand comfort zones, and that the process can be navigated with the aid of challenge and support theory.

Participants will be able to consider approaches that they will like to follow when receiving support, and when experiencing challenge moving forward (Identify what their challenge and support language looks like).

Program Description

1. Presenter(s) Introduction: 2mins
2. Challenge & Support Theory Framework: 4mins
3. Invitation into Discomfort: 2mins
4. Graduate School Anecdote: 5mins
5. Action Steps / Future Implications: 2mins

Presenter(s) Introduction: The presenter will use this time to introduce himself by sharing contextual information. The presenter will share his name, his pronouns, his current graduate program, and some identifying information about himself (First generation, low-income, Latino student). The presenter will transition into the framework of his session by sharing how his identity connects to the challenges that have pushed the boundaries of his comfort zone within his graduate program.

Framework: Nevitt Sanford's Challenge and Support Theory (1966) states that optimal learning experiences occur when students are met with challenges in which they have ideal support that helps them balance things out. If an environment/situation presents too much challenge, students may escape from it and/or not be able to ideally adapt to it. If there is too little challenge (or too much support and not enough challenge), then students may feel safe/satisfied with where they are at and their learning remains stagnant. Challenge and support are two sides of the same coin, just like positive and negative is within life (yin-yang). Having a healthy balance of both elements can create ideal conditions for students to experience maximum growth in; it takes time and maturation for individuals to feel ready/comfortable with various degrees of challenge.

Invitation into Discomfort: The presenter will use this time to highlight the importance of support systems and self-care, while also highlighting the importance of experiences that challenge our personal/professional growth. Challenge and support looks different for everyone, every individual processes these areas through their own level of balance, and that is a concept that the presenter will reiterate before moving forward. The presenter will thank the audience for wanting to lean into a presentation that may cause them to critically reflect on how they perceive discomfort, and use this opportunity to quickly remind participants that the goal of this presentation is to get the audience more comfortable with the uncomfortable.

Anecdote: The presenter will reflect on a recent experience that has challenged him to think critically about his personal/professional identity. The reflection will briefly describe the presenter's recent experience with a supervisor that was damaging to his mental health, and how he was able to progressively address the situation by using his own emotional intelligence. This brief story analyzes the process that was followed in order to navigate the situation, articulates what support looked like during this process, and identifies the biggest takeaways the presenter received from this experience. The presenter will acknowledge his own vulnerability in sharing anecdotes from his graduate school experience, and how that can be a challenging conversation for some. The purpose of this anecdote is to reflect on the growth that came from a challenge in a professional manner, not to target someone.

Action Steps / Future Implications: The presenter will encourage participants to think about how they will approach challenges in the future, with the possibility of an unsupportive supervisor as an example. Different strategies will work for different people, so it's important to have an idea of what kind of approach one will use to navigate these moments. The presenter will highlight "emotionally intelligent leadership" as one of the various approaches that could be used to lean into discomfort.

The presenter will reiterate that challenges are a beautiful opportunity for phenomenal growth, and that the audience should lean into them at their own pace (but with a "one step at time" mentality as well). The presenter will leave the audience with the following edited quote and asking them to think about what this means for them:

"The ultimate measure of a [person] is not where they stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where [they] stands at times of challenge and controversy" - MLK Jr.