

# How Distractions Can Hamper Learning

BY BETSY JACOBSON AND BEVERLY KAYE

With foresight and honest dialogue, leaders can minimize the learning barriers that hinder knowledge absorption and group interactions.

Learning leaders find themselves playing a variety of roles. They are coaches, consultants, instructional designers, meeting facilitators or change agents, to name a few, and these roles are played out to enhance the learning capacity of the organization and individual learners. However, there are certain conditions that can distract from or cripple learning, and are therefore important to chief learning officers.

When learning leaders and the people they support are trapped by these distractions, the consequence is a loss of focus. Twits, nits, and snits are three pervasive conditions that can inhibit a learning professional's ability to impart a message. These linguistic codes also can remind CLOs of their own potentially dysfunctional thinking. This thinking can be triggered by internal self-doubts or external differences with colleagues and customers. Without a language to name these conditions, they can become persistent, and learning is impaired. The learning leader's ability to recognize these conditions enables quicker resolution.

Although these distractions occur in all learning situations, this article examines them in the classroom, coaching or meeting facilitation situations. Self-awareness is an important teacher. If one is to coach, train or facilitate, the ability to diagnose and recover from distractions is critical, because when they happen, they block learning and affect performance outcomes.

- **A twit is often enmeshed in a frustrating mental state dominated by chastising self-talk.** "I should have ..." "If only I hadn't said ..." This self-talk robs the individual of perspective. It's difficult to listen to external voices when internal ones are screaming.
- **A nit is an aggravating encounter with another person.** The situation is often unspoken and usually goes unresolved, only to bubble up at unexpected times. In his book, *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*,

Peter Senge might say this is an example of a "left hand column" — thoughts, feelings and assumptions that go unsaid and untested.

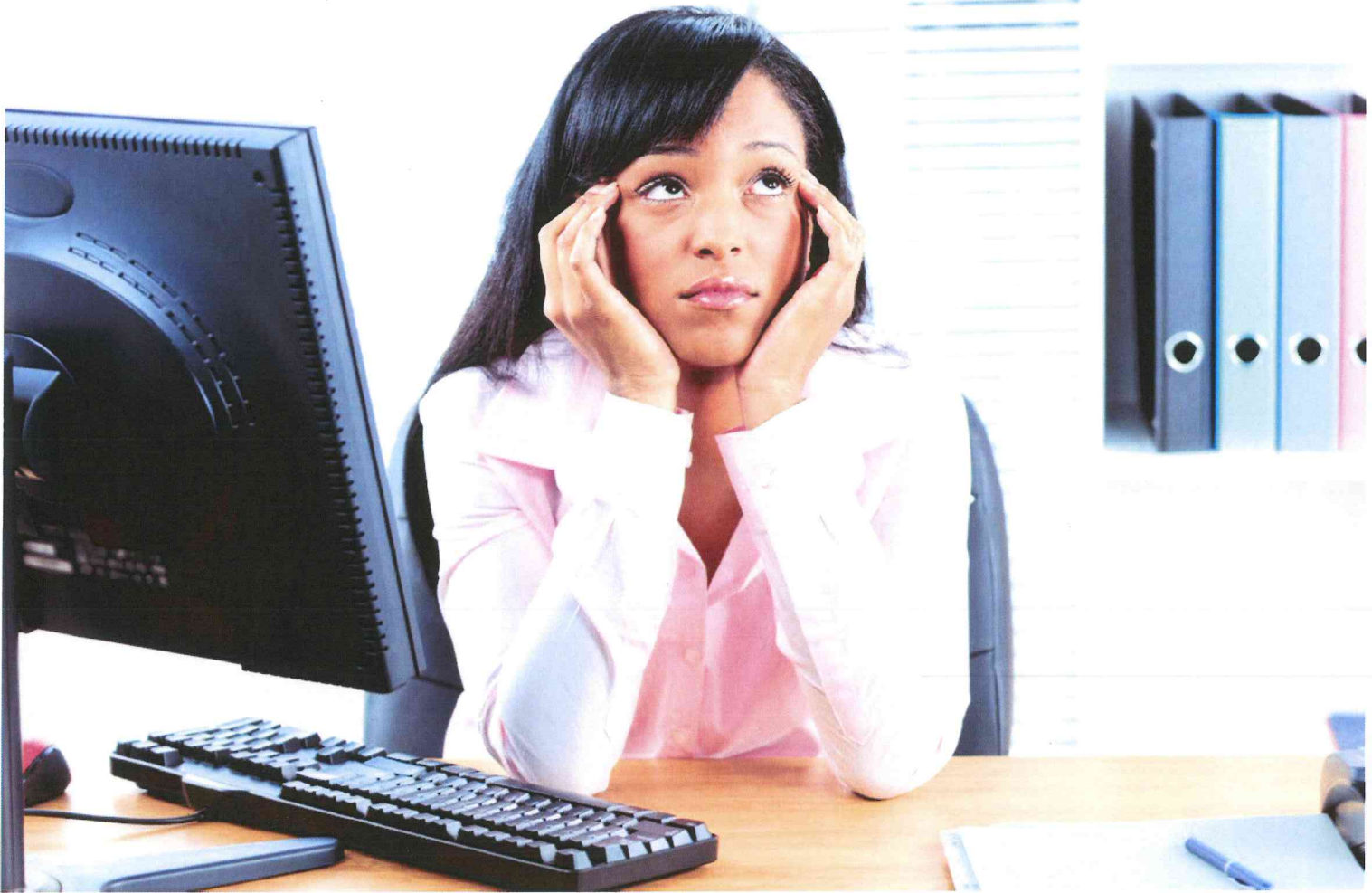
- **A snit stems from unsettling circumstances within a group.** "This isn't going well and how can I get out of it." Snits evolve from mismatched personalities, expectations or poor timing — often between the leader and a group. Challenges become personal; there is a struggle for power or a struggle of will, and everyone wants to be right.

Twits are intrapersonal, nits are interpersonal, and snits occur within a group. They trigger a pause so the learning leader can take stock of what's happening. Without awareness, these distractions can spiral and affect relationships, create a loss of focus, reduce results or impact goal fulfillment. What follows are ways to identify twits, nits and snits and change the dialogue.

## The Nature of Twits

Although twits are inner voices not involving interaction with others, they can ring as loudly in one's ears as if someone were yelling. They are important to investigate because they invariably lead to twit fits, which if ignored or unattended can cause individuals to question their own abilities or become defensive. Either outcome can have a negative effect on learning. Twits generally stem from unfavorable feedback, comparing one's self to others, or feeling a need to defend one's image.

**Unfavorable feedback:** Getting feedback is an occasion for agony and ecstasy, often simultaneously. There is a tendency to see one negative comment as a commentary on one's total capability. Positive feedback may be ignored, and feedback can help to close the gap between what was intended and any potential learning opportunity.



Uncomplimentary feedback may feel like criticism and prompt employees to question their abilities, which in turn creates defensiveness. Individuals may blame themselves or others. In either case, it's a waste of energy. Feedback should be interactive where individuals take responsibility for their thoughts, opinions and suggestions. Feedback should lead to capacity building rather than having one person question their personal capability and be left in a twit.

**Competitive comparisons:** Competition can be valuable when it fuels one's personal best and reduces the likelihood of a comparison twit. Yet, a comparison twit happens when one person notices another's strengths, allows the observations to diminish his or her own and then loses focus. This type of twit is fueled by greater visibility, powerful client access and money or other perks. "She published more ..." "He got invited to ..." "Why wasn't I, rather than she, asked to ...?"

**Image defensiveness:** An image twit creeps in when there's tension between reputation and status — people's work doesn't fit with their perceptions of

their strengths, or employees aren't assigned to projects where they can excel. "If my position reported to the CEO, then ..." or "If I were known as a change agent rather than a trainer, I could ..." When image defensiveness takes over, good judgment wanes and the individual may miss opportunities.

One way to deal with twits is to reframe the negative internal dialogue from self-recrimination to problem-solving. For example, one might think, "Oops, here comes a big twit; I've got to cool down." Or ask, "Where is this twit coming from, and what do I want to do about it?" Internal candor is the first step.

A twit is a major distraction in any learning process. When learning leaders, coaches, facilitators or trainers find themselves in a twit, for example, it reduces their capacity to solve problems, consider options and take action. Sharing can be cathartic when one is embroiled in self-doubt. Ask, "Here's how I reacted. What did I miss?" or "Have you had similar feelings? How did you handle it?" Perspective from a trusted colleague or friend can help keep the twit from being blown out of proportion, and may diffuse it entirely.

### The Nature of Nits

Nits are real or imagined problems that occur between two individuals, whether expressed internally or externally. They can arise from jealousy, power struggles, miscommunication, different behavior styles or unrealistic expectations. Nits may be temporary or ongoing, depending on the relationship and the content of the nit itself. They usually develop at inopportune moments when stress and pressures are particularly intense. When nits are small, they're often glossed over. "That's just the way he is." Rather than resolve

sionals — they need to be addressed by the people involved. The nit may require CLO mediation. Using leveling and listening techniques will help to bring about resolution.

### The Nature of a Snit

Snits arise as a result of tension between a group and the leader, although they can occur between members as well. The setting can be anywhere more than three people are involved. It's often a meeting that goes bad where the leader is left holding the blame or is left

When issues crop up, it's an opportunity to change the playing field. Refocusing the dialogue is a chance for breakthrough thinking, behavior and learning.

the conflict, it tends to be pushed aside, which can make it difficult to complete the task at hand.

Any learning process can be disrupted when a nit occurs because the individuals involved are no longer able to learn from one another and take in diverse opinions. There are three ways to deal with a nit: skip it, admit it or redirect it.

**Skip it.** In some cases, raising the issue is pointless. Skip it when it's not really a problem and can be easily gotten over. People should learn to recognize when they've transposed their own intentions into someone else's actions and accept that it's difficult to change other people's behavior.

**Admit it.** When facing a nit, the criteria for a successful outcome depends on the leader being able to answer no to questions such as: "Do I need to defend my position?" or "Am I so sure that I'm right?" or "Must I take the lead?" The power of resolving nits is in the lessons they teach, rather than who turns out to be right or wrong.

**Redirect it.** When co-facilitators have differing opinions or disagree about how content is being delivered, redirecting can be a desirable solution. Sensitivity and timing are always factors, but the trick to avoiding nits is to anticipate the possibility that they will arise and agree on the redirecting strategy up front. Decide on a signal or a tactful intervention, such as: "Here's another option." or "This can be looked at from several other viewpoints as well."

Since nits occur between two individuals — colleagues, bosses, customers or even learning profes-

sionals — they need to be addressed by the people involved. The nit may require CLO mediation. Using leveling and listening techniques will help to bring about resolution.

**Forced attendance:** While most learning and development programs are no longer mandatory per se, meetings can be. Mandatory anything is ripe for a snit. Participants can enter angry, frustrated or uninterested. Facilitators may get hung up on the resistant dynamics and end up in a snit. A better approach is to welcome disagreements and encourage rather than defend them. Most group snits can be diffused if members can express their objections or frustration. Otherwise, the snit only grows.

**Expectation snits:** A snit will occur when a group expects one thing and realizes it is getting something different. A desire for simple answers and fast solutions is the source of this snit. Too often a policy change, process improvement or development strategy is sold based solely on its benefits. If the fix falls short of its advertisement, participants are disappointed. Or, when the group or individual feels like the facilitators are only worth their time if they have answers the participants want to hear, the facilitators may find themselves swimming in snit waters.

Having people say immediately what would make the meeting or learning event satisfactory gets these expectations out front and gives the leader a chance to align them with proposed or intended offerings.

**Environmental snits:** The organizational environment itself is fraught with distractions. When issues are immediate and pervasive, it can unsettle a group and make it hard to focus on learning. The leader's

first inclination is either to ignore the distraction or to overcome it with his or her best entertainment efforts or passion for the topic. These behaviors are cues for a snit because the leader is going one way and the group likely is going another. The most disturbing factor about environmental distractions is they are often out of the leader's control and happen just when there is an opportunity to otherwise have a successful meeting.

**A rule of thumb to avoid all snits:** let the cat out of the bag. Name the issues that are distractions. Find out if the group expects something else. Ask what it will take to recalibrate focus. The truth always sets the group free. Acknowledging the distracting issue shows respect, and the group will be more than willing to engage in the topic at hand. There's no need to wrestle; groups are surprisingly cooperative if asked for their help.

### Tackling the Terrible Trio

There are several ways to lower the frequency and lessen the impact of twits, nits and snits. Learn to identify, confront and address these distractions; it may require developing alternative action plans to avoid being caught by surprise. Have tools ready to deal with the situations. A good way to begin dealing with these conditions is to be aware, recognize them and be mindful of what's going on with partners or within a group.

Leaders who devote time and energy to clarifying learning expectations, objectives and roles will build the environment necessary for successful outcomes. Good role negotiations can help to avoid distractions and conflict. Make agreements up front. Talk about what each individual or group could do more, less or the same of to be most effective. Many nits and twits can be headed off by frank discussions before the learning event begins. When co-facilitating, it will help to talk about each other's previous experience with twits, nits and snits.

There is no use pretending these things don't happen; distractions are permanent fixtures in everyone's life, and telling a boss, colleague or partner about them helps. When issues crop up, it's an opportunity to change the playing field. Refocusing the dialogue is a chance for breakthrough thinking, behavior and learning.

Not internal self-doubts are bad. They provide empathy on the change journey. Learning leaders would be wise to raise these issues with their teams and encourage dialogue on these usually verboten topics. **CLO**

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