

The Learning Zone Model

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Moving Beyond Your Comfort Zone

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Get out of your comfort zone to seek new discoveries and opportunities.

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You've been asked to do something completely new. Something beyond your experience or skills. How do you react? Are you excited by the prospect of learning something new? Or do you feel stressed and overwhelmed?

In this article, we take a closer look at the three stages we often move through when we're tasked with learning a new skill. These stages comprise the

The Learning Zone Model was originally developed by psychologist Lev Vygotsky, but has since been popularized by many other educational professionals, including adventurer and educator [Tom Senninger](#).

It demonstrates how, in order to learn successfully, we must be challenged. But the balance needs to be just right: if we're not pushed hard enough, we're unlikely to step out of our Comfort Zone; but if we're pushed too hard, we start to panic and feel overwhelmed. In both cases, learning is restricted. Instead, we need to aim for the "sweet spot" that is the Learning Zone.

Figure 1 illustrates the three zones that comprise the Learning Zone model.

Figure 1 – The Learning Zone Model

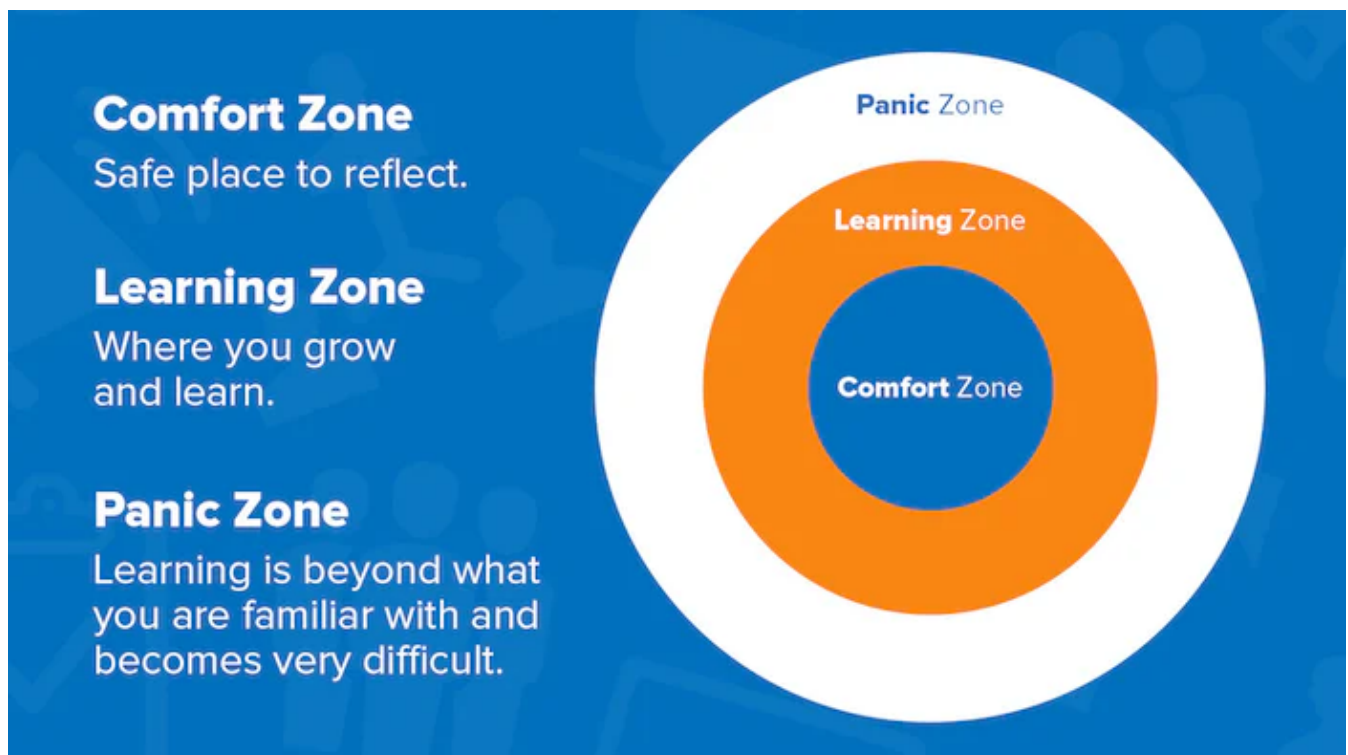


Figure 1

3. The Panic Zone.

Let's look at each zone in more detail:

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1. The Comfort Zone

In your everyday working life, you likely have a range of routine tasks that you carry out with confidence. You know the processes that you need to follow, the outcomes that you need to achieve, and the people you need to work with to make them happen. This is your Comfort Zone.

Your Comfort Zone isn't necessarily a bad place. It's where you can perform well, set strong [personal boundaries](#), and even rest, recharge and reflect.

2. The Learning Zone (or Growth Zone)

Beyond the Comfort Zone lies the Learning Zone (also known as the Growth Zone). Here, your existing skills and [abilities are stretched](#), allowing you to learn and develop new ones.

Moving into the Learning Zone might feel intimidating at first. But it doesn't have to be. Look at it as an opportunity for adventure. Allow yourself to [be curious](#), ask questions, and take calculated risks.

You might feel a little pressure at the prospect of this new challenge, but a [productive amount of pressure](#) can actually have a positive impact, pushing you to succeed without making you struggle or panic.

Ideally, as you spend more time in the Learning Zone, your mastery of new skills will increase. Some of these new skills will then pass into your Comfort Zone.

3. The Panic Zone

The third and outermost zone in Figure 1 is the Panic Zone. Here you move beyond both what you're familiar with, and what you can [reasonably be expected to learn](#). This is a bad place to be. You might feel swamped by unreasonable demands and information that you're unable to cope with. Your stress level may build because you feel that you're going to fail.

This can be damaging and demotivating. You may come to fear the experience, and you don't want to return to it.

However, if the challenge that you're given is reasonable and doesn't stretch your skill set too much – and you can easily access the right support – tasks that might once have panicked you may become easier to achieve.

Note:

The Learning Zone model shares some features with Carol Dweck's work on the [growth mindset](#), particularly the importance of embracing challenges and pushing beyond what you already know to enhance and grow your skills.

How to Navigate the Learning Zone Model

So, how do you move from the Comfort Zone to the Learning Zone, while avoiding the Panic Zone? Here are five strategies that can help:

1. Develop Trust and Resilience

To use the Learning Zone Model effectively, you have to believe that you can learn, and that you are safe to do so. You need to have [trust](#) in yourself, as well as in those who manage, coach or mentor you.

[Psychological safety](#) is also important if you're to be able to learn without feeling stress. Your organization's culture is important here. It's vital that people

collaboration, and provide adequate support and guidance to help people to learn in a way that feels safe.

To successfully move through the learning zones, you'll also need personal determination. There will undoubtedly be challenges along the way, particularly as you reach the outer edges of the Learning Zone. [Building resilience](#) can help you to bounce back from setbacks or failures, and continue to learn.

2. Build Anchors to Your Comfort Zone

Building anchors that tether you to your comfort zone can also help when you're learning something new. Anchors are opportunities to use skills and procedures that you're already familiar with. They shouldn't restrict your learning, but they can reassure you that your basic skills are still sound as you enter new territory.

Returning to our example of the project manager tasked with making a presentation to the CEO, an anchor would be the opportunity to collect and organize data that's specific to the project, or use simple presentation techniques that they are already familiar with.

3. Work With Mentors

As you move from your Comfort Zone into the Learning Zone, you'll likely need support and guidance.

A [mentor or coach](#) can help you here. Mentors can be a motivating force. They give feedback and ask questions to help you build your confidence, and

examples of how to apply a new skill, as well as the benefits that it can bring. Perhaps it will help you to complete your everyday tasks more effectively, achieve a career goal, or even get a promotion.

4. Use Scaffolding

"Scaffolding" refers to support structures that encourage learning and development. It's often put in place by a mentor or coach, but you can look for opportunities to develop your own scaffolding, too.

Scaffolding can take many forms, such as simple words of encouragement, questions that help you to think about your next steps, and reminders of what you've already achieved. At times you may need more practical, hands-on help – if you're given a task that you really can't do yourself, for example. If this happens, don't be afraid to seek assistance, ask questions, and take notes!

5. Learn Socially

Developed from the work of [Albert Bandura](#), social learning theory suggests that we learn by observing and imitating other people. We watch and compare ourselves to [role models](#) who motivate and challenge us.

However, social learning is not just a case of copying what you see. Sure, the specifics of what you're learning are important, but so are the attitudes, tips and tricks that your role models use as well. In other words, social learning should involve [purposeful practice](#), rather than just learning theory.

The Learning Zone Model

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The Learning Zone Model describes the journey that we often take when we start learning something new. It is divided into three distinctive zones:

1. **The Comfort Zone:** where what you do is routine and familiar.
2. **The Learning Zone (or Growth Zone):** where you experiment, develop skills and stretch your abilities.
3. **The Panic Zone:** where you're tasked with learning something that is well beyond your knowledge, causing you to feel overwhelming and panicked.

To learn successfully we must push beyond our comfort zones, but not so far that we become panicked or stressed. If this happens, learning will likely fail.

Five key strategies can enable you to navigate the Learning Zone Model and improve how you learn. They are:

1. Developing trust and resilience.
2. Building anchors to your comfort zone.
3. Working with mentors.
4. Using "scaffolding."
5. Learning socially.

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KB

Katy Barnes

I much prefer the 2 x 2 matrix of Support vs. Comfort. Discomfort + Support = Growth. The Support element is critical to measure and understand, as otherwise, you end up in the panic zone.

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