

TempoLake

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Tribune photo by Michael Budrys

Donalee Markus: "I'm asking you to augment how you process information."

Mind games

Educator teaches corporate executives how to learn

By Karen DeBrulye Cruze
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

Highland Park educator Donalee Markus hopes to teach the corporate world how to innovate and take risks.

That may not seem like a unique concept among people accustomed to business-seminar spiels, but it's the way Markus approaches her task and the results she gets that make her stand out. By playfully challenging

bright brains with a variety of cognitive-reasoning puzzles, including elaborate geometric and number-sequencing constructions of her own design, Markus helps pinpoint and defuzz stagnant thinking.

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Markus

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of learning as well as a lessening of stress. The institutions and businesses she has worked with include Mervyn's Department Stores, based in Hayward, Calif.; the Boston office of Coopers & Lybrand, a national public accounting firm; and Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico.

"I've accomplished more in six months than in [the previous] three years," said JoAnn VerHoog, founder of the VerHoog Piano Institute for Accelerated Learning in Chicago and Evanston, who studied privately with Markus. "[The work] really increased my processing and organizational skills across the broad spectrum, not just in work. ... I'm more aware each month and still going."

"Basically I teach intelligence," said Markus, a 48-year-old mother of four who holds a doctorate in administrative sciences from Northwestern University in Evanston and who has based her post-graduate work on that of innovative Israeli educator Reuven Feuerstein, a student of famed Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget.

It's not facts or tricks to learning that Markus is talking about. Rather, it's an ability to learn how to learn, to explore new material via her mind-challenging games, make sense of them, then transfer that ability to the workplace and the personal realm.

"I give people an opportunity to bring out their best," she said.

That includes people who might be expected to be at their best already.

John Fox, who works in the environmental safety and health department at Los Alamos, was responsible for bringing Markus in for a seminar in 1990, her first independent foray into business group education (previously, in addition to her private practice, she had taught a program called "Learning How to Learn" for the Britannica Learning Centers). At the time, Fox was a group leader in training and motivational development at the national lab. He contracted with Markus after participating in a workshop.

"I think one of the things that impressed me," Fox said, "was that she approached problem-solving from a relationship perspective; it built on how you look at basic parts [of a problem] and expands. There's not anyone else approaching problem-solving or training from that direction."

And, he reported, among the cross-section of Los Alamos employees—physicists, engineers and support staff—who took part in the seminar, the response to Markus was positive.

"They appreciated getting an opportunity to see how other people think," he said.

Feuerstein's ideas, on which Markus has built, originally were designed as an enrichment program for children with learning problems.

She has taken it "into a slightly different arena," said Robert Harth, director of the Professional Assistant Center for Education Program at National Louis University in Evanston, who, like Markus, has worked with Feuerstein. "I don't know of anyone else" bringing Feuerstein's ideas into the business world, he said. "Everybody probably could benefit from their cognition becoming more proficient."

Explaining her approach to learning people's thinking patterns and where those patterns falter, which she likens to being a technician going in to fix small imperfections in a good Swiss watch, Markus is enthusiastic and energetic.

Once Markus can see how people approach and organize tasks and where their cognitive strengths and weaknesses are, she gains a sense of which exercises and puzzles at her disposal will help that person think more cogently in other avenues of the brain. The exercises are not like homework, to be taken away by the client and done in privacy. Instead Markus "mediates" the learning in person so she can continuously see how a person works.

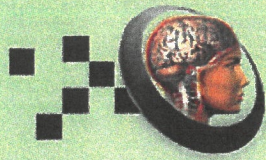
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And, he added, he thinks Markus' work fits in with the direction businesses are moving as management systems change. Business people have to learn to think differently, become better risk takers and work through problems, he said. "The first step in the process is to open minds to change."

These excerpts have been taken from the *Chicago Tribune, Tempo Lake*, Section 18, Sunday, April 24, 1994. The complete article is available upon request.



Designs For Strong Minds

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"Imagination is a powerful cognitive tool. With visual imagery, we can explore and test new ideas to "get a feel" for them before we commit our time, energy, and/or money. The more clearly we can imagine success, the more confident we are in our ability to achieve it."

(Markus, Donalee, The Road Trip, Pg; 31, 2008)

Articles / News

Chicago Tribune
— ONLINE EDITION —

MIND GAMES EDUCATOR TEACHES CORPORATE EXECUTIVES HOW TO LEARN

Chicago Tribune (Pre-1997 Fulltext); Chicago, Ill.; Apr 24, 1994; Karen DeBrulye Cruze. Special To The Tribune.;

Abstract:

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Full Text:

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The office of Markus' practice, Designs for Strong Minds™, is in the basement of her French Provincial-style house, where she resides with three of her children, Lindsey-Paige, 17, and twins Brent and Gavin, 12, and her husband, Dr. Norman Markus, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon associated with Highland Park Hospital. (Son Roderick, 22, attends the University of Vermont in Burlington.)

And the heart of that house is clearly the kitchen, where Markus is often apt to wind up fixing something to eat for her individual clients, who range from children with learning disabilities, to bright high school and college students looking to sharpen test scores, as well as adults-about 40 percent of her individual clientele. Many of the adults are high-achieving attorneys, business executives, traders, dentists and other professionals who go to her because they need to change direction or believe they're not performing up to full potential.

"The food is a perk," Markus said emphatically. "It's an important part of my setting." And, she said, it helps to make people more comfortable in a situation where they're bound to be uncomfortable.

"I'm asking you to augment how you process information, to experiment. It's uncomfortable ... because change is uncomfortable. Even minimal change is uncomfortable."

Change, within a context of intellectual curiosity and a love of teaching, has certainly been part of Markus' life, though it's hard to fathom change giving her too much pause.

Markus grew up one of four siblings in Chicago and Skokie. Her late father, Nate Weinstein, was in the liquor business. Her mother, Rose Weinstein, who now lives in Northbrook, is a homemaker who makes art out of everyday life, Markus said.

Markus attended the National College of Education in Evanston, earning bachelor's and master's degrees in education. Then she worked in the Evanston school system as an English teacher and English department chairwoman at the junior high level.

It was at that time that a friend introduced her to Norman Markus. The two clicked, married in 1969 and moved to California.

After moving back to Illinois in 1976, and between the birth of her first son and her daughter, Markus grew restless and decided to go back to school to earn a doctorate. She began work in communicative

disorders at Northwestern. But she felt limited by the field of diagnostics.

So she switched to the administrative and management sciences because industrial training and development interested her.

Then, just as she was finishing her thesis, Markus came upon an article that pushed her in a new direction with what she eventually saw were concepts applicable to her degree.

The article in the October 1981 issue of *Psychology Today* was about Reuven Feuerstein and his Instrumental Enrichment (IE) program. She seized upon his game-playing mediated learning, in which the instructor constantly works one-on-one with the student, as something that would benefit her children.

"I was captivated with the concept," she said. "I just pursued it. I wrote away for information."

After attending an IE training program offered through the Schaumburg school system, Markus formed a children's study group. But the work had helped her own thinking process so much that she began to see that it could be expanded and possibly brought to the working world to help give American business people an edge.

A year after the birth of her twin sons in 1982, Markus was in Montreal with her family at a conference where she delivered a paper. She happened to meet Feuerstein and told him her ideas for his program.

By the following month Markus was working personally with Feuerstein, studying with him in Canada, Europe, Israel and America and traveling with him to conferences worldwide.

"He was definitely my mentor. He taught me so much, it was totally invaluable," she said.

Eventually, though, Markus began to follow her own path, which led to many speaking engagements and eventually working with more and more adults as she moved closer to her goal of working with business groups.

"The impressive thing about her as an individual is her tremendous ability to get along with people," said husband Norman, who credits her with doing not only a wonderful job with her students but also with their own children.

"She enjoys the changes she's able to create in people. . . . The longer she's involved in it, the better she's become," he said.

One of the first steps she takes in helping clients, whether as individual students or members of groups, is to learn the strengths and weaknesses of their habitual thinking. To this end, Markus, among other exercises, gets people to draw a complex figure composed of many shapes that looks a little like a fish with a dripping nose. The test does not measure intelligence, but how people draw this piece and where they start and what they notice or don't notice about it tells Markus how that person processes information.

Looking at the figure, it's easy to think just about anyone could reasonably approximate it with some degree of sameness and accuracy. It's a tendency that underscores how often people like to assume that other people's thinking patterns are like their own, just the thing that can lead to false assumptions and miscommunications. In fact, there often is a dramatic difference in how people perceive and draw the picture.

Some, for instance, start with its defining rectangle; others work on its elements systematically from left to right.

One of Markus' clients, an attorney, produced a chaotic jumble of the drawings' elements. This person, Markus said, had a great deal of trouble "getting it together."

"She can't identify the big picture, can't connect one piece of information to another," Markus said, although the way she drew a central line within the figure showed she was well grounded and consistent.

Jutta Fangonilo, administrative services manager in sales promotion at Mervyn's Department Stores, recalled that drawing the figure was particularly instructive to the groups Markus addressed there last August and November because, she said, it so clearly illustrated how some people are straight-line thinkers, others not.

"I think everyone got something out of that," Fangonilo said.

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Markus charges a starting fee of \$3,000 per 3 1/2-hour session for 18 to 24 people. Individual clients pay \$150 an hour for adults, \$100 for college students and \$75 for children. Typically individual clients spend 24 to 36 hours with her.

"Companies interested in this kind of work are on the edge. . . . You need a real visionary to (see that if you) change the stress level of workers, it will have a direct effect on productivity. You can't quantify it," Markus said.

Meanwhile, Markus is concentrating on new challenges. She's taking on new students and pursuing more corporate program opportunities. And she's driving herself to learn more about neurology and psychology.

"I'm constantly looking at myself: Is there something else? Is there something I'm missing? I want to be the first to know," she said.

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