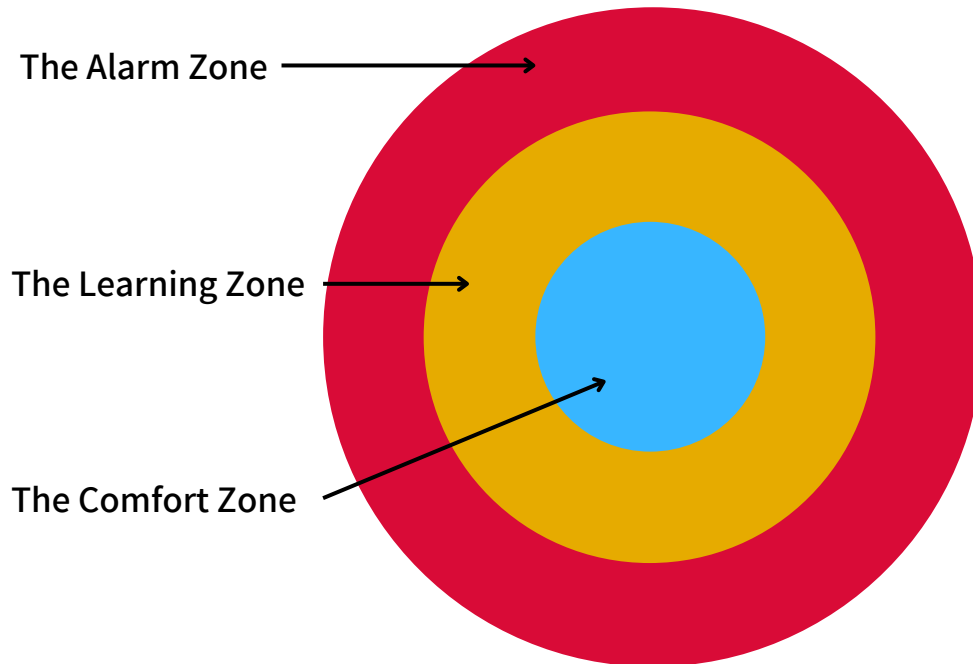




The Learning Zone Model

HANDOUT

The Learning Zone Model demonstrates how, in order to learn successfully, we must be challenged to push beyond our comfort zone. But if we push too far, we can become overwhelmed or stressed. If this happens, learning will likely fail. We need to aim for the “sweet spot” that is the Learning Zone.



The model divides the experience of learning into three main zones:

1. **The Comfort Zone:** what you do is routine and familiar.
2. **The Learning Zone (or Growth Zone):** you experiment, stretch your abilities, and develop new skills.
3. **The Alarm Zone:** where you're operating outside your knowledge and understanding, causing you to feel overwhelming and panicked.

1. The Comfort Zone

This is where you're comfortable and confident in your ability. Things are within your existing capacity and experience. You know exactly what you need to do and how to achieve it. You're not learning or developing new skills, because you aren't stretching to take risks or try new things.

2. The Learning Zone (or Growth Zone)

Your existing skills and abilities are stretched, allowing you to learn and develop new ones. Moving into the Learning Zone may feel uncomfortable at first, but it is an opportunity for growth. Challenge yourself to be curious, ask questions, and take calculated risks. As you spend more time in the Learning Zone, you develop and practice new skills which eventually become part of your Comfort Zone.

Source: Maxwell Smith, Community Organising Fellowship, 2022. Adapted from: Mindtools, The Learning Zone Model: Moving Beyond Your Comfort Zone, <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/learning-zone-model.htm> [Accessed 1 July 2022]

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3. The Alarm Zone

Exceeds the realm of what you're familiar with and can reasonably expect to understand. You might feel overwhelmed or stressed by too much information. This can be damaging and demotivating. You may experience a fear response and retreat back to your comfort zone, preventing further learning.

How to Navigate the Learning Zones

So, how do you move from the Comfort Zone to the Learning Zone, while avoiding the Alarm Zone?

1. Develop Trust and Resilience

Psychological safety is important for learning without feeling stress. This requires trust for yourself and those around you, emphasising a culture of connection, collaboration, experimentation, and mutual support. You also need a level of resilience and willingness to challenge yourself and accept failure.

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 knowledge that you're already familiar with. Rather than restricting your learning, they help build a foundational base from which you can build and explore.

3. Access Mentoring and Coaching

As you move from your Comfort Zone into the Learning Zone, you'll likely need support and guidance. This can come in the form of facilitation, constructive feedback, and strategic questioning that help you build confidence, reflect on what you've learned so far, and develop new ideas and processes for learning.

4. Use Scaffolding

Scaffolding refers to support structures that encourage learning and development, including things such as: regular encouragement, feedback, and reflection, guiding questions, examples, practice, debriefing, and planning. Don't be afraid to check-in with peers, seek support, and take notes.

5. Learn Socially and Collectively

Often people learn best in a supportive social environment, where we can motivate and challenge each other, take risks together, and learn from observation, discussion, and shared practice. This can also involve peer-to-peer coaching and constructive feedback.

The Alarm Zone

What it feels like:

Stress and overwhelm block learning and growth.

Learning is beyond what you are familiar with and becomes very difficult.

What it's good for: It's time to stop and reorient, seek a different direction to keep learning and stay engaged.

The Learning Zone

What it feels like:

Challenge, excitement, and engagement create learning and growth.

Uncomfortable, requires focused effort and attention.

What it's good for: Where you learn and grow.

The Comfort Zone

What it feels like: It feels good to stay here, where it's comfy and safe. Boredom and complacency stifle learning and growth.

What it's good for:

A safe place to reflect.

