

How We Lead

Monthly musings for change agents in business and society
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Getting Unstuck, Part 2: Ways of Being Stuck

It is said that the only two certainties in life are death and taxes. I disagree. Equally inevitable is getting stuck in something unpleasant. It happens to everyone and at a greater frequency than either death or taxes.

Indeed, I have found that there are four types of people in the world (actually, four ways of relating to the state of being stuck, but let's stereotype for a moment):

1. Those who know they are stuck, have a clear but mistaken understanding of why, and repeat this explanation to themselves so many times that they get more stuck.
2. Those who know they are stuck and have no clue why.
3. Those who claim they are not stuck.
4. Those who know that they are always stuck in something, love it, and laugh about it.

Now, a closer look at each.

- 1. Those who know they are stuck, have a clear but mistaken understanding of why, and repeat this explanation to themselves so many times that they get more stuck.**

Most of us think we know what ill us. "This change initiative is in trouble because of turf wars between divisions." "My career is stagnant because I don't have enough self-confidence." "My life is out of balance because there isn't enough time." "If I exercised more, I would be happier." All of these statements make sense when we utter them. Indeed, they seem like the truth. And herein lies the problem: most of us are lousy diagnosticians of our own troubles.

Consider Dan, a talented independent consultant attempting to build a business after years working for companies. When I asked him what was getting in the way of attracting new clients, he said, "fear." When I asked him about obstacles to doing specific tasks, his response was the same: "fear." My assessment was different. Sure Dan had fear, but what kept him stuck was his standard way of reaching prospective clients. He made cold calls rather than tapping into his network. When I mentioned this to him, he gave me a look of surprised recognition. He was so immersed in this pattern that he was oblivious to it.

2. Those who know they are stuck and have no clue why.

This is rare among adults. It is also exceedingly useful. Once we throw up our hands and say, “This makes absolutely no sense to me,” we’ve actually taken a step forward. We’ve admitted that we don’t know “the answer” and therefore opened ourselves to new ways of seeing.

3. Those who claim they are not stuck.

Usually this takes the form of “Yeah, I was really in trouble a year ago, but now everything is OK.” Often, it is true that we are better off than before—more peaceful, more balanced, more successful, whatever the case may be. Equally true, upon closer inspection, is that we are stuck in something new, different, and perhaps invisible to us. Jacob Needleman, author of *Money and the Meaning of Life*, makes this point eloquently:

“A Freudian psychoanalyst once summed up to me his vision of the human condition by saying that man is not as bad as he thinks he is, nor can he become as good as he dreams of becoming. [My] assumption is precisely the opposite: man is in a far worse condition than he believes, but he can become far greater than he imagines.”

4. Those who know that they are always stuck in something, love it, and laugh about it.

The Dalai Lama probably fits this category. As do a number of other spiritually realized beings. Perhaps even one or two who shop in the same grocery store and you and me. By and large, though, the capacity to fall in love with the state of being stuck is rare.

In short, being stuck isn’t the exception in life, but the rule. Thus, it makes little sense to ask, “Am I stuck?” The answer is always yes. A better question is “Where am I stuck?” Or, better yet, “What are the ways I might be stuck?” Here are five that show up frequently in change agents:

1. **Quantity of work.** Too much...or too little. Some of us feel like we’re working all the time. Others feel the pain of being without a job or enough gigs. Either way, being stuck means working a different number of hours than our aspirations.
2. **Meaning of work.** Here the issue becomes not how much I work but how meaningful it is to me. How fully am I using my gifts and abilities? How adequately does my work reflect my deepest values? Am I even aware of these gifts, abilities and values? For many of us, exploring these questions is difficult, because our universities and organizations provide little support for such inquiry. It is also unpleasant, because when we find we are out of

alignment, the next question to enter our minds is “How the hell did this happen?” Whether we blame ourselves or point a finger outward, the result is the same. In Jacob Needleman’s words, we realize we are in a far worse condition than we imagined. And, to put it poetically, this sucks.

3. **Mood.** Each of us tends to “hang out” in one or more moods. A mood is a constellation of emotions and judgments that shapes what we think is possible in life. If emotions are like the weather, constantly changing and unpredictable, then mood is like the climate, relatively constant throughout the day and year. Some moods like hope, joy, and curiosity are positive in that they open more possibilities than they close. Unfortunately, most of us hang out in moods that dampen possibilities. Examples include resignation, frustration, cynicism, resentment, and anxiety. Yet these moods are so much a part of our everyday life that we don’t even notice them. Fortunately, there is good news: it is possible to change our mood. Indeed, this is one of the most powerful ways of getting unstuck.
4. **Body posture.** One of the most surprising wake-up calls for me occurred when someone showed me how my hunched-over posture cut off my breathing and weakened my sense of personal power. Her advice – to sit and walk more upright with my shoulders back and my chest relaxed and expanded – felt strange to me since I was skeptical about anything having to do with the body. Yet it had a dramatic impact. I gained tremendous confidence and began to take more risks in my work and my interactions with others. All by changing my posture.
5. **Language.** What we say does not merely describe reality, but actually brings it into being. Our ability to be effective and fulfilled in the world has everything to do with the words we use. And our choice of words is precisely that: a choice. For example, Mike used to apologize in many situations that didn’t warrant it. It seemed like the good and noble thing to do. In reality, apologizing made him small – in his eyes and others.’ Indeed, every time he said, “I’m sorry” when it wasn’t appropriate, it reinforced his sense of being inferior. Nowadays, the temptation is still there, but he catches himself. The resulting pause does something interesting. It forces him to ask himself, “What do you *really* want to say to this person now? What best serves this moment?” The result is more skillful conversations—and more effective action.

In the next issue, we’ll explore the warning signals of being stuck and how to recognize them.

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