

How We Lead

Monthly musings for change agents in business and society
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Getting Unstuck, Part 4: Getting Unstuck

I am under no illusions that it is possible to get unstuck from reading a single column. And I trust you are not either. Nonetheless, there is value in painting in broad brushstrokes a picture of how leaders can find their way out of the deepest muck and back onto the paths of competence and fulfillment. Toward this end, I present you with Five Steps to Getting Unstuck.

Step One: Declare you are stuck. Remember the Declaration of Stuckness from a previous issue? This is how to begin. Say, very simply, “I’m stuck.” Or draw upon metaphors from art (“My paintbrush has run dry”), transportation (“I’m out of gas”), religion (“I’m in hell”), or baseball (“I keep striking out.”) Whatever language you choose to use, the purpose is the same: to express through words the truth about the current situation you inhabit – without explanations, apologies or rationalizations.

Step Two: Reflect quietly on the following question: why do I want to get unstuck? Your answer may relate to your own self-preservation. Are you exhausted, stressed out, short on cash, about to be fired from your job, at risk of physical illness, or bored? These are all good and legitimate motivations.

Alternatively, your commitment may stem from advice, encouragement or even pressure from another person. Here it is not so much a matter of preserving yourself as it is of preserving a relationship (though obviously the two are linked).

Or...your reason for getting unstuck may be to allow you to give your deepest gifts to the world. This is often the case with heretics and change agents. By their very nature, these individuals exist not only to preserve their own vitality and the health of their relationships, but also to serve others and the world. Thus, when a team developing a profitable and environmentally clean product gets tangled in interpersonal conflict, the world loses. When a highly skilled foundation executive in the health care arena gets burned out and has to take a leave of absence, the world also loses.

The converse of this is obvious: when you succeed in getting unstuck, it is not only you who benefit. All of the people who receive your deepest gifts benefit. Not just once, but for the duration of your lifework.

(Many of us get stuck in situations where we are not giving our deepest gifts, where we are not serving the world. I have been in this situation numerous times. It is for this reason that I caution people about assessing others' values and the extent of their social contribution merely based upon where they work or what they do today. Far wiser, it seems, it to follow Aristotle's suggestion to judge the value of a person's contribution over the course of their entire lifetime. For who knows what surprising twists and turns that person's life may take? As one example, most of America's great philanthropists did not fully commit to funding civic and community betterment until *after* they had created their fortunes. Bill Gates was a billionaire for several years before marriage and other life events led him to make a major commitment to reducing global health inequities.)

Step Three: Say the following to a close friend or colleague, "I'm not sure why I'm stuck or how to get unstuck but I'm committed to getting unstuck." There are three parts to this statement. The first two involve an acknowledgment that you have blind spots – some rather large, nasty ones, in fact – and that it is better to be conscious of these than not. The third part is a declaration that you are capable of becoming more competent and fulfilled today than you were yesterday. Such a declaration literally opens up possibilities for being and acting in new ways.

It may seem silly or unnecessary to actually say this out loud to a friend. Go ahead and do it anyway.

Step Four: Get an assessment of your blind spot. This is incredibly difficult to do on your own. As I've written before, most of us are terrible diagnosticians of our own troubles. We simply cannot see what it is that keeps us in a bind. Because of this, it is useful to seek the perspective of a skilled coach, colleague or friend.

Making an assessment of someone's blind spot is both a science and an art. A good coach draws upon a set of distinctions that is grounded in practice and theory. One that I regularly use involves three domains of human development: I, We and It. "I" refers to an individual's thoughts, emotions, intentions and visions, as well as their body posture and the bodily sensations as they think, feel and act. "We" refers to the people they hang out with (personally and professionally) and the way they hold conversations with these people. "It" refers to the systems and structures in their life, such as the layout of their office, how they schedule their time, and the flow of information in their life.

Most of us focus on only one or two of these domains and ignore the others. A good assessment recognizes this pattern and describes how it contributes to a person's stuckness. For example, most engineers (to pick on one group) are highly competent in the "It" domain but typically struggle in the "I" and "We" domains – not because they are stupid or bad, but simply because they have chosen careers that do not emphasize these domains. In contrast, I work now

with a consultant who is fairly aware of how she thinks and interacts with others (the “I” and “We” domains) but only recently has paid attention to how she schedules her time (the “It” domain).

Step Five: Undertake a set of practices and self-observation exercises designed specifically around your blind spot. Again, this is extremely difficult to do on your own. And there are very few books that offer suggestions specific enough to your situation to be helpful. (An exception: *The Wisdom of the Enneagram* by Don Riso and Russ Hudson, which suggests practices and self-observation exercises tailored to each of nine personality types).

A practice is something that you do on a regular basis to rewire yourself. It is characterized by the following traits: (a) You will resist doing it at first, (b) You will feel uncomfortable while doing it, and (c) When you do it consistently over a period of time, it will become a habit (a.k.a. it will become part of you). My practices over the past year have included Aikido (to learn to blend with others’ power when attacked), karaoke (to develop the ability to express emotions through my voice), and watching certain movies that cause me to contact the fierce and untamed parts of myself.

A self-observation exercise is a concerted effort to notice yourself in action. It involves a series of customized questions that fall into two categories: those that force you to recognize your blind spot in action in the very moment it is occurring, and those that allow you to catch yourself acting differently. For example, one very powerful exercise for people who feel ungrounded in their lives is to stop three times during the day and notice both (a) when their feet are wobbly and unbalanced and (b) when their feet are planted firmly on the ground. In each case, they can ask themselves several additional questions, such as (a) “What was happening when I noticed this?” and (b) “What was the outcome of this situation?” If this sounds strange, that is a reasonably good sign that such an exercise may be useful for you. (I chose this example deliberately, because the importance of being grounded during the day is not specific to one type of person or profession, but foundational to the effectiveness and well being of us all).

So, in summary, the Five Steps to Getting Unstuck:

1. Declare you are stuck
2. Reflect on why you want to get unstuck
3. Say, “I’m not sure why I’m stuck or how to get unstuck but I’m committed to getting unstuck.”
4. Get an assessment of your blind spot.
5. Undertake a set of practices and self-observation exercises designed specifically around your blind spot

Correction. There is also a Step Six:

Always remember that
The person you are right now
And the person you are becoming
Are different people

So...

Choose your friends
And your activities
Accordingly

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