

How We Lead

Monthly musings for change agents in business and society
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June 2002

Getting Unstuck, Part 3: Recognizing You Are Stuck

Getting unstuck in life requires first realizing that we're stuck. Sounds simple, right? The only trouble is that most of us don't have a clue how to do this. Nor do we want to. We are infinitely gifted at avoiding, denying and covering up our own stuckness.

A lot of dreadful stuff happens to us because we're stuck but don't realize it. The CEO announces, "Unless we recoup our losses, we're going to have layoffs." The executive director pulls you aside and says, "You have thirty minutes to clear out your desk and leave." The doctor reports, "You have lung cancer." The teacher calls to say, "Your daughter does not show up to class."

It would be foolish to suggest that all these events are preventable. Much in life is out of our control. Nonetheless, in many cases, we do have power to act.

And the first action worth taking is to admit that we are stuck.

Yes, that is right. The way out of a rut is neither engaging in fuzzy optimism (assuming everything is okay) nor pointing fingers (at ourselves or others). Instead, the way out is to notice precisely where we are in this moment, however embarrassing a place it is. And then – as we shall see in the July issue – to understand how we got here in the first place.

Just as the United States was born from the Declaration of Independence, freedom to move forward in life is born in what I'll call a Declaration of Stuckness.

The difference? Unlike Jefferson's treatise, a Declaration of Stuckness is short and rarely requires a feather pen. It involves saying, "Hey, I'm stuck."

What must be present to warrant such a declaration? What are the warning signals that you might be stuck?

1. **The Groundhog Day Effect.** Remember the funny movie in which Bill Murray lives the same day over and over again? Ever have an experience like this yourself? Perhaps you are on a team that gets slowed every time by the same conflict between the same two people. Or maybe your draft reports come back with identical comments each time ("Too long" or "Where's the

data to support this?") Or perhaps you've left (or been forced to leave) three jobs in the past ten years, each time for the same reason. These are examples of the Groundhog Day Effect.

2. **A Banana in the Tailpipe.** When you start a new project or initiative, nothing seems to move, and you cannot figure out why. You have a great idea, a top-notch group of people to carry it out, and determination to see it through. Yet nothing seems to happen. That is, until you notice the phenomenon popularized in the film Beverly Hills Cop: a banana in the tailpipe. This phenomenon has three key attributes: (a) It blocks you from moving, (b) You cannot see it, and (c) If someone suggests it, you laugh at the absurdity. One such phenomenon that is pervasive in business is a way of holding conversations that leads us to do things contrary to our own interests and best intentions. We hold conversations for action (like making requests and promises to carry out certain tasks) before first holding conversations for relationship (to explore common interests and determine whether shared action even makes sense) or conversations for possibility (to generate multiple alternatives to the first actions that come to mind). Most of us don't see the distinction between these conversation types, so we cannot recognize an imbalance between them. We simply don't see the warning signals. In short, a banana in the tailpipe. For example, the Enron, Arthur Andersen, and WorldCom accounting scandals represent more than just ethical lapses or regulatory malfunctions. They also indicate a failure among key players to hold conversations for possibility – to ask a very simple question "What alternatives exist (to cooking the numbers)?" The result: escalation from being merely stuck to being bankrupt...or nonexistent.
3. **Substitute Gratifications.** These are things we do, take, or consume to substitute for what we really want but have trouble finding: meaning in our organizations, relationships, and lives. The obvious examples are alcohol, junk food, and smoking. Less obvious but equally popular are television, compulsive exercise, and compulsive busyness. Television seems a passive activity – flipping the remote is the only movement required – yet it represents an active, even aggressive, way of numbing ourselves to the emotions that arise when we are stuck (anger, sadness, fear). Intense exercise, on the other hand, is viewed as a sign of fitness and health. Yet when done compulsively, it provides a way to run away (literally and figuratively) from those same feelings. Perhaps most popular in our culture is staying busy. Ever wonder why there never seems to be enough time for everything? You might respond, "Well, of course, that's because I have so much to do." This may be true, but ever wonder why you keep yourself in continual motion during the day, rarely pausing for even a moment to breathe? Here's a question I bet you've never asked yourself: what emotion am I avoiding by keeping myself busy? If you think this is a ridiculous question, try this: for twenty minutes today halt all activity – just sit someplace quietly – and notice what emotion surfaces. You may be surprised.

4. **Signals from the Body.** When Joe Biden ran for the Democratic nomination for president in 1988, he had a brain aneurysm. But he did not notice it until after he had been forced out of the race. Why? Because he was moving too quickly to realize what was happening in his body. Only after slowing down, did he pay attention. It is for this reason that Biden later thanked John Sasso, Michael Dukakis's campaign manager, for saving his life by releasing the videotape that showed Biden plagiarizing another politician's words and thereby forced him out of the race. This is an extreme example. For most of us, our bodies signal that we are stuck through recurring or particularly pronounced body sensations (e.g. headaches, pain or dizziness). These are not merely physiological. They are often manifestations of a gap in life between where we aspire to be and current reality. For example, when I notice that my shoulders feel weighted down, it typically means that I have taken on more in life than I can handle.

5. **Unique Measures.** *In Consultant's Calling*, Geoff Bellman describes a nifty way he lets himself know whether or not his life is in balance. For every night he is away on business, he brings home a bar of hotel soap. While at home, he uses the soap. When he notices a pile of soap bars accumulating in his cabinet, he knows it is time to cut back on his travel.

Next month, in the fourth and final installment in this series, we will examine specific actions you can take to get unstuck.

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