

How We Lead

Monthly musings for change agents in business and society
By Amiel Handelsman

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Hello friends,

Welcome to the first issue of *How We Lead*.

There is no shortage of things to read these days, so let me begin by addressing the obvious question:

Why this newsletter?

For the past five years, I have worked with change agents in business, foundations, and the not-for-profit world as a consultant and guide. During this period, I've noticed a peculiar paradox. Leading successful organizational change and finding personal fulfillment both require that change agents invest in their development as leaders and human beings. Yet most find neither the time nor the support to make this investment. The result is two-fold. Promising initiatives fall short of their potential, and the people leading them burn out, get ostracized, and/or discover their lives are out of balance.

It does not have to be this way.

Therein lies the purpose of this newsletter: to provide support and guidance to heroes, heretics, and the people who love them.

We'll tell stories – mine and yours – and offer exercises to enable practice. To keep things interesting, we'll also review books, movies, and other happenings – all with an eye toward opening new possibilities for effective action.

Amiel

Getting Unstuck, Part 1: Reaching for the Milky Way

I once got my arm stuck inside of a vending machine. The scene of the crime was Camp Geneva in Wisconsin. I was six. The goal was to steal a Milky Way bar by reaching up the chute and opening the latch. These were the 1970s. Vending machines were not yet designed to prevent such theft. These were the golden years for kids with a big sweet tooth, little money and few scruples.

Lunch had just ended, and six of us – all boys my age - were in the cafeteria. Except for us, the room was empty: the perfect time for stealing candy. I was the last to perform the heist, mainly because I was afraid of getting caught. After a dose of goading from the others, I reached my arm up the chute, extended my fingers toward the Milky Way, and...found myself unable to reach my target. I pushed and wiggled, but no luck.

So I gave up. I removed my arm. Or tried to. It wouldn't budge. A few kids pulled on my shoulders, hoping this would make the difference. One even grabbed my feet. Nothing seemed to work. Indeed, all the pulling and tugging brought pain to my arm. I started to cry. Pretty quickly, the kids realized that the cause was lost and, more importantly, that my cries put them at risk of being caught. They fled.

At this point, it was just me, my arm, and the vending machine. I cried more loudly. After what seemed like forever – probably twenty minutes – who should walk in but the director of the camp. This was the last person other than my mother I wanted to see at that moment. I don't remember what he did, but within ten seconds, my arm was released. I cried for the next two hours, first in his arms, then in my mother's.

I used to view this as a morality tale (“How I learned not to steal”), but now it seems to be about something more profound – or at least more relevant to my current work offering guidance to change agents. I view the story of the vending machine as my first lesson in how people get stuck in life and what it takes to get unstuck. Consider what happened:

1. Getting stuck was a group effort. I did not do it alone, nor could I solely fault my buddies.
2. Getting stuck was painful. First, there was the physical pain. Then came the mental anguish. Finally appeared the fear of what others (namely, my family) would think.
3. Once I realized I was stuck, I thought I would never escape. My arm would be locked in an unholy embrace with the vending machine forever.
4. Trying the same method of escape over and over didn't help. It made things worse. Yet I persisted in the effort, applying more pressure each time.
5. The people who helped me get stuck were the wrong people to help me get unstuck. At first, neither they nor I realized this. But pretty quickly, it became obvious.
6. Getting unstuck required support from someone with two attributes. First, he wasn't around when I got stuck. Second, he was the last person I thought could help me.

Notice anything familiar here? If you are like others who have heard this tale, I'll wager you do. The lessons are relevant to not only children, but also adults.

And they come into play for those of us stuck not in vending machines, but jobs we don't enjoy, relationships that seem stifling, or habits that threaten our health.

Of course, it is possible to carry the analogy too far. Getting stuck as adults is not identical to my first experience. Consider:

1. Getting stuck can happen without us knowing it. Often, we don't even realize that we are stuck. We just are – well - the way we are. And the pain we feel? It, too, seems natural. It is only after we get unstuck that we realize how much we have been hurting.
2. Getting unstuck doesn't always mean getting out. Sometimes the most courageous thing to do while stuck in a "bad" job or relationship isn't to leave it, but to live it differently. To change ourselves from where we are.
3. Getting unstuck often requires paying attention to that which we typically ignore: our blind spots. Do you know your blind spots? Probably not – otherwise they wouldn't be called that!
4. Getting unstuck doesn't happen quickly. It involves building new competencies, and this takes time and practice. I typically ask clients for a six to twelve month commitment of working together. This gives us a realistic time frame, and protects against fantasies of overnight transformation.
5. Crying for help and waiting to be saved don't work well. More effective is to make clear and specific requests for assistance. "I need your support" is too vague. Better is to ask: "Would you be willing to give me your attention for ten minutes each day without interrupting or problem-solving?" Or "Let me shadow you for a day so I can get a taste of working in product development."

These are my "takes." Now I am curious to hear your experiences. When in your life have you been stuck? What was the situation? If you managed to get unstuck, how did this happen?

Send me your stories.

In the next issue, we'll look more closely at how to recognize that you're stuck. What are the warning signals? How can you spot them soon enough to act?

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