

Dispatches from the Discomfort Zone: Managing Risk, Change and the Pace of Innovation

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I was about 11 years old, and my father had finally given me permission to dive off the high diving platform. I was elated. Finally! I clambered up the ladder, and waited impatiently for the people in front of me to complete their dives. I imagined my floating swan, my crisp jack knife, my arching back dive. I had waited for this moment all summer, and as I stepped onto the platform, I surveyed my domain, sure that all eyes were on me, hands ready to applaud. I saw the pool and the grounds around it in a new light. I could see so far, and things were so green. WOW! I was actually higher than some of the trees. Which was, well, pretty far up. Yeah, uh, wow. And the people, now that I thought about it, were really, really small down there and the water was ...sofaraway. And just like that, my joy turned to terror. What had I been I thinking? I didn't know it would be so HIGH up here. I couldn't do this, I just couldn't. All my muscles froze, I teetered and stepped back, the grumblings from my playmates growing louder in the background. Peer pressure mounted. I couldn't breathe. My heart pounded. My legs were shaking. I wanted the comfortable familiarity of the lower board as much as I'd wanted the privilege of the platform, but the crowd of kids on the ladder blocked my escape. Finally sheer humiliation took over, and I jumped, eyes desperately closed, arms and legs flailing, and hit the water like a wet mattress. But when I came up for air, and wiped the water out of my eyes, I found myself exhilarated as only those who have escaped certain death could be. I was alive! I had done it! Hey, that was GREAT! Let's do it again!

We've all been there. It may not have been a diving board for you, perhaps you were raising your hand in class for the first time, or playing in a piano recital, or taking your first time at bat. But at some point, early in your life, you formed your first conscious memory of stepping outside the familiar to encounter the unknown. In my case, the thrill of accomplishment overcame my fear, and I became an avid diver. My small world expanded effortlessly to include this new awareness, and I grew in maturity, skill and self-respect. I also learned a positive lesson about the rewards of taking a risk. But let's imagine, for a moment, that my first ungraceful attempt had resulted in an injury, or that someone told me how stupid I'd looked up there, or mocked my uncoordinated descent. What if there had been no one blocking my way, and I had simply given up and made my way back down the ladder? What if I had failed in some way apparent to others, or even only to myself? How likely would I have been to take that next trip up the ladder? What lesson would this experience have taught me about the risks we take to learn something new?

Essentially, life is all about risk and change. Living things are subject to a cycle that begins with birth and ends with death, with all manner of lovely and unlovely alterations along the way. Change is inevitable, and with change comes the discomfort of the unknown. However, we will be impacted differently, not only by our relative interest in and tolerance for new experiences, but also by the nature of the change itself. Some changes creep up on us, some are an organic part of our passage through time...we either don't notice them until they've already done their work, or we are prepared in advance. But sometimes the need for change is shoved rather rudely in our face. It demands something different of us, to jump off that diving board NOW! These are the kinds of changes that threaten our status quo, that cause our heart to pound. We become suddenly rudderless, overboard, skidding on black ice, lost in the forest without a trail of cookie crumbs to bring us home. We find ourselves in the middle of what feels like a survival issue. And in response, we often grab instinctively for the handhold that will tell us we are still in control of our destiny. We do what has always worked for us before, and we react to this new situation out of our deeply ingrained old habits, in an attempt to

return to the familiar, the comfortable, the known, while simultaneously growing and changing. It is a baffling and frustrating phenomenon...we can't make progress without discomfort, and discomfort discourages progress. In many cases, we won't even try to make a change unless the pain of the status quo is greater than the anticipated pain of transformation.

A habit is not a bad thing, necessarily. A habit is simply an efficiency mechanism of the human brain. We blink our eyes without having to think about it. We park the car in a tight spot without having to consciously move every small muscle, or make every distance judgment. We have learned these muscle movements and awareness patterns and locked them into memory. Many of our habits serve us well. The values of a civil society are taught early and often, so we are most of us courteous, respectful, honest, caring, responsive. We brush our teeth, we pay our bills, and we show up on time. We look both ways when we cross the street, and we don't speak to strangers. We remember the fastest way to work, the phone number of our best customer. But this efficient way of learning and coding information and response can limit us as well. Because the more deeply ingrained a habit, the more uncomfortable it will be to leave it behind, to challenge it, to learn something new. And the more we rely on old information to solve new problems, the more vulnerable we are to the very thing we are trying to avoid...the discomfort of failure.

I improve, therefore I am.
Tiger Woods

Tiger Woods is considered to be one of the finest golfers ever to hit the links. His rapid rise and extended dominance of the field had some people saying, "Tiger wins again? How boring!" He was a phenomenon of major proportion. So young, so gifted, so successful. And then he did something unfathomable...he changed the swing that had taken him to the top. In an attempt to find a swing that better suited his maturing body, he redesigned the Tiger machine. He turned away from the habits he had developed through years of practice and play, and picked the swing apart, bit by bit. He felt awkward, uncomfortable, and, inevitably, he started losing. As time went by, and he fell further and further behind, it was clear that Tiger had signed up for a long period of readjustment.

When asked why he would want to tamper with his winning formula, he characteristically replied, "I felt like I could do better. If I play my best, I'm pretty tough to beat. I'd like to play my best more frequently, and that's the whole idea. That's why you make changes." He had formed some bad habits in response to early knee injuries and a relatively light-weight physique. They allowed him to win in the early years, but they were starting to chip away at his resilience. "You can play from the wrong position for a long time with good hands," he said, "but eventually it's going to catch up with you." Looking ahead, he knew his reliance on the familiar would reduce his ability to play well. He saw reinvention as his salvation, and he was willing to take the risk that he could master the new swing and resume his place at the head of the pack. "I've always taken risks to try to become a better golfer, and that's one of the things that has gotten me this far." Tiger was patient, persistent, and gracious through the months of relearning, and his strategy finally began to pay off. Now Woods is waiting for golf to feel effortless again, for his new habits to become as comfortable as the old ones were. "That's the whole idea of making a change," he says, "you try to get it where you don't have to think about it."

The world we live in has changed enormously in the last 60 years. The shifting allegiances and alliances of the geo-political spectrum are dizzying. Our family connections are strained by distance and difference, and our economy fluctuates wildly from super-affluence to jobless and homeless within a short period of time. The old rules of order no longer apply, or are applied differently in different circumstances. Our business organizations can no longer brush their teeth automatically...they are always being asked to rethink their responses. This is a

world that demands that we not only survive, but also thrive on chaos. But too many of us have been taught by our experiences to expect order, structure, and predictability. Like Tiger Woods, we have a winning formula that has carried us a long way, and we want things to make sense in the way we were taught to define sense, and to work the way they always have. And far too often, when they don't, we go back to the beginning and replay the tape, expecting to hear a different piece of music. Intellectually we know things are different, but our uninformed old habits are stronger than our new information. They might not be getting us what we want, but we're used to them. Eventually, we reason, they will reward us again.

*If you're not making mistakes, you're not taking risks, and that means you're not going anywhere.
The key is to make mistakes faster than the competition, so you have more chances to learn and win.*
John W. Holt, Jr.

In ways we are still counting, the recent dot-com bubble forced us to reinvent our swing. The very notion of virtual enterprises and internet commerce disrupted old assumptions about how business was done. I confess to having been something of a reactionary about the rise of internet retailers such as Amazon.com, in justifiable fear that over-reliance on faceless transactions would damage the fabric of a society that thrives on face-to-face marketplace interactions. The loss of the independent bookstore, the specialty music shop, the grocery store, the ability to touch and ponder before I bought seemed too big a price to pay for speed and lower cost. Or so my habitual way of looking at the world told me. But regardless of individual preference, technology assumed its imperative position, and what could be developed, was developed. Things moved very fast, the pace was breathless. It all seemed so different, a world in which only the under-40...well, let's be honest, under-30...crowd could truly be at home. It was everything Tom Peters talked about in his books about chaos and innovation: the rise of the small, service-oriented business and the rejection of top-heavy management hierarchies. It was an orgy of unstructured business activity...as close to organizational anarchy as we may ever get. It demanded a different way of thinking, of working, of prospering.

The young entrepreneurs who fueled this economic engine were playing by different rules. Their risk threshold lay far beyond the edge of the diving board, in a virtual world where anything seemed possible to the person willing to spend enough time to make the dream manifest. And in the process of accomplishing their dreams, they both delighted and horrified. I was resident in Silicon Valley during both the build up and the take down, and it was fascinating to watch the storm surges of youthful exuberance break down the barriers of established business models. Our old habits were not only challenged, they were made irrelevant, impossible, by the rapid changes in the marketplace. Grumpy independent-bookstore Luddites like me were an inconsequential force in the rise of Amazon.com. Technology ruled unchallenged. If we wanted to be on the team, we had to play by the new rules, and we scrambled to learn fast, keep up and adapt our old swing to the new requirements. And for a time, we were wildly successful.

But...but. There was a dark side. It was intoxication, hallucination, societal trance. Too many people swung wildly to the other extreme. The baby went out with the bathwater. Experience? Bad. Never done it before? Perfect. The less time you had spent as a business professional, the more creative your ideas were assumed to be because you weren't tainted by "outmoded" thinking. So many people were needed to fuel this engine, it was said that if you could fog a mirror, you could get a job. And as many of us can attest, that wasn't much of an overstatement. There was too much money being thrown at too many ideas without viable business plans attached to them. The phrase, "We've got a really great website!" was commonly spoken in response to my questions, "What is your product?" and "How are you going to make money?"

In addition, the new commerce warriors brought their own set of comfortable, ingrained habits with them, habits formed from growing up in an affluent society, without major war, with video games and faster computers and no need to add and subtract because the calculator did it all. Where email and cell phones made you available 24/7. Where there was less and less privacy and no time – and no perceived need -- for reflection. Where inspiration consistently trumped planning and action trumped all. Where doing the next thing was an end in itself. Where the pace was fast, faster, fastest. Where a product could go from innovation to obsolete in six months. For these entrepreneurs who had spent so much of their formative professional years operating in a virtual world, there was insufficient attention paid to the concrete. It was even projected that we would have no more need for buildings, for land, for location. It could all be done on line. In the end, we found we had hitched our wagons to the Tasmanian Devil. Ultimately, everyone paid the price.

But in the aftermath of the Category 5 bust, as we were picking up the pieces, holding our heads, and wondering what truck just hit us, it became clear that the landscape would not be returning to the old configuration, and that our expectations had been irrevocably changed by the firestorm of the 90s. In 1997, for example, I had been part of a group in Cisco Systems that was evangelizing the dramatic impact internet business solutions could have on the bottom line. Cisco's pioneering forays into using the internet for everything had revolutionized the company, and people outside wanted to know more, wanted to test the waters, wanted to know what the investment in information process infrastructure would be. Four years later, the value of using the internet for internal corporate processes like HR, purchasing, employee communication, medical records, training and development, etc., was a given. It wasn't "if," but "when," and tomorrow wasn't soon enough. The business world had been picked up by the scruff of the neck, shaken hard, and put down again with some of its parts in different places. Like it or not, it was clear that things would be different from now on.

*A relationship, I think, is like a shark, you know? It has to constantly move forward or it dies.
And I think what we got on our hands is a dead shark.
Woody Allen, Annie Hall*

Not all change experiences are this dramatic, or impact so many people. But with technology in the driver's seat, the pace of our personal and professional existence is increasing inexorably. Speed has become a given. Needing it yesterday is a generous deadline. In the same way we used to say we can't move that fast, we now say we can't slow down. Through the miracle of wireless technology, we can defy the laws of physics and be in more than one place at the same time, simultaneously raising our families, exercising and conducting meetings with people on three continents. The pace of product development may have slowed somewhat, but there are still more surprises waiting for us in the garages of technology visionaries than we can imagine. This new reality makes many of us tired, wanting to go back to a time when the pace was slower, when there was more time to figure out which fork in the road was the best direction. But we no longer have a vote on that issue. We need to accept that we now live in what Dee Hock, former CEO of Visa Corporation, calls a "chaord," a blend of chaos and order that forces us to build a flexible framework for making spot decisions every day, instead of assuming we can set up a system that will function without our thinking about it. Our challenge is to find ways to deal effectively with what is – a relentless, uncompromising rate of change.

So what does it mean to us in the corporate world? How do we navigate this rapidly-shifting business landscape? How do we meet the new challenges? Like Tiger Woods, we have to reinvent ourselves and redesign the way we work. We need to be courageous enough to look at who we are and what we want to accomplish, and ruthlessly reassess the skills, talents and attitudes required to succeed. If we are wise, we will keep the best of the old and adopt the best of the new. To serve a marketplace that flexes continually, product strategies and marketing programs will need to be double and triple designed to meet the many "what ifs" we could encounter. Chronic innovation may demand greater flexibility in leadership style and organizational

design, but there will also be a need for definable internal structure, and robust planning processes. Our employees will thrive on clear, unambiguous communication, and benefit from frequent opportunities to ask questions, share information, and understand how things fit together.

As we become a more virtual community, we will also need to accept that we can always be seen, that our comfort zone is not necessarily someone else's, and that our perception of reality may be violently out of synch with the person in the next cubicle. We will find it harder and harder to live in a wired world without learning to see the world from another's viewpoint – not to judge or dismiss, but to understand and find common ground.

So many new things. So many new things all at once. New requirements for leadership. New habits of conscious communication. New ways of marketing our products, of getting our message out. New ways to be successful. New playgrounds to investigate. With the unfamiliarity quotient so high, there will be a correspondingly-wide discomfort zone for us to pass through. We will be tempted to slip back, and will have to manage that risk as carefully as we manage the risk of moving forward. But moving forward is what it's all about. Woody Allen had it right. Moving forward is what keeps us alive, growing and expanding into our next phase of development. On the other side of our discomfort zone, we will find unimaginable rewards.



About the Author:

Courtney Behm, founder and principal consultant of Viewpoint Solutions, has been a management consultant and executive business coach since 1999.

She began her career with IBM, and has held management-level positions at Wang Labs, Motorola/Codex, Telebit, Centigram Communications and Cisco Systems. She received an M.B.A. from the Harvard Graduate School of Business, where her areas of concentration were Marketing and Organizational Behavior. A dynamic speaker and skilled facilitator, she conducts client engagements that offer a wide range of creative opportunities for professional and personal excellence.

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