

Learn to leave your comfort zone behind

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Have you ever declined an opportunity to move up or move elsewhere because you’re comfortable where you’re at? I have at times and usually ended up regretting it later on.

It isn’t easy learning something new or foreign to your background or experience. It can be terrifying or even make you feel insecure, especially if you’re put in charge of an arena you’ve never entered before.

When I was offered the position of superintendent of the world’s largest community college system, I initially hesitated because my only experience in that type of institution stemmed back to my short tenure as an instructor and teacher many years prior. I was comfortable where I was in a different field, leading people and managing things in a tough and rigorous military organization. However, after much consideration, I decided to set my fears aside and venture to where I was being asked to go. I delved into the regulations and procedures for managing a community college institution and relied on my abilities as a leader and manager to be effective. It all turned out fine!

Staying in comfort zones is very instinctive. In fact you can see it throughout nature. For instance, when it becomes necessary to trap a wild monkey for a physical evaluation, trappers put a bright Christmas ornament into a bottle with a neck large enough for the

monkey to slip its open hand into the bottle. The monkey is attracted by the bright ornament and reaches inside to take it. With its hand wrapped around the ornament, the fist will not come out. Struggle as it will, the monkey will not relinquish the ornament and therefore cannot free its hand. Eventually, the trappers come along and capture the monkey--trapped by its unwillingness to give up the ornament.

Most of us overestimate the value of what we currently have (and have to give up) and underestimate the value of what we may gain. I knew a regional sales manager for a large company who was once offered a promotion at the corporate office to become vice-president of sales and marketing for the entire corporation, with a 50 percent salary increase. He wondered if he should take the position. He felt there were many downsides. He currently had a lovely corner office with two large windows overlooking a beautiful lake. He said it was relaxing to look out and see the white boats sailing on the blue water. His new office was going to have one tiny window overlooking the concrete wall of a factory. Furthermore, he had a great year last year and his department bought themselves all new furniture. He had the desk of his dreams with a chair that was just right for him. His office at headquarters was going to be so small that none of that furniture he bought would properly fit in it. He didn’t know if he should take the job!

As you can see, he overvalued the “important” factors in the current situation of his desk, chair, office size, and view, and undervalued the “unimportant” aspects of the future job like a major promotion and 50 percent salary increase.

In situations like his, it’s important to realize you can’t get to second base with your foot still on first. In the end, he really wanted the promotion so he moved, but not without a lot of stewing and post-buyers’ regret. He ended up doing very well, once he learned to give up the present so he could move on into the future.

It doesn’t mean someone is a failure if they stay in their comfort zone. Many people stay in their current jobs for the personal conveniences they’re accustomed to and decline to uproot their daily routine for a higher paying job that rolls out new challenges or sacrifices they aren’t ready for. And these people do just fine and are happy. But should they ever complain about not having a higher standard of living, then they’ll need to step out of their comfort zone and into uncharted territory or stop complaining. The bumps in the road may be many at first, but in time the road will smoothen out for clear sailing.

If you want to advance in your career or professional life, you will, at times, have to leave your comfort zone and venture to where opportunities are great and your potential can be realized.

~ The End ~