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Keep Your Coils Light



**I think and think for months and years.
Ninety-nine times, the conclusion is
false. The hundredth time, I am right.**

Albert Einstein

Go ahead. Pick up a Slinky. No, not the newfangled plastic models. I'm talking about the good ol' metal kind, circa 1964. If you don't have one handy, then go ahead—you have my permission—put down the book (you just started chapter 1, so it won't be hard to find your place) and buy one.

And no, I'm not getting kickbacks from the makers of Slinky. Nor am I an employee, or even a shareholder. (Although, now that I think of it . . . maybe I'll take a break of my own, and call my stockbroker.)

OK, got one? Now set the toy to its highest level. You

know what I'm talking about: top of the stairs. Then do the deed. Tip it over. Watch it. Laugh. Now go chase it to the random location where it came to a stop.

Isn't this cool? Don't you feel a couple of years younger?

Probably the most delightful, childhood-restoring moment is that split second when the pile of coils tips over just far enough to lose its balance and fall tumbling onto the next step. Teetering over the precipice, as it were.

Wouldn't you agree that this is the most awesome part?

See? It's a matter of weight shifting, causing motion. If some section of those beloved metal coils were even a third again heavier, the process would not happen. If they were somehow encrusted with grime or rust or a coat of lead paint, the illusion of perpetual motion that makes us love the Slinky simply would not take place.

My point? First of all, you have to *keep your coils light*. If your Slinky is too heavy it will go nowhere. Or to mix another metaphor, learn to be light on your feet. Learn to dance. Move quickly, responsively, without the delay heaviness imparts. Be nimble.

To paraphrase songwriter Paul Simon, "*Hop on the bus, Gus.*"

The future belongs to those who can adapt rapidly. You've heard it before: The information explosion has simply resulted in too much data coming too fast for folks with slow reaction times. Today that weekday edition of the *New York Times* lying on the sidewalk contains more data than the average seventeenth-century human digested in a whole lifetime.

Whoa! What happened in all that time? Did we grow an extra brain?

Don't laugh, my friend. Because the same amount of change projected ahead into our future won't take four hundred years. It'll take twenty-five. Which means by the time your son or daughter picks up your dog-eared copy of this book twenty-five years from now, he or she will have the same vantage point you have right now over that hapless inhabitant of the 1600s.

Remember those poor souls in the old Westerns who didn't recognize the gunfighter, rubbed him the wrong way, and wound up dancing a lead-inspired jig out in the dust beside the horse troughs?

STAY LIGHT ON YOUR COILS. →

Think of yourself as that person. Dancing—perpetually. Only the bullets never run out, and the one doing the shooting isn't a person, but a force of nature—think of the Terminator crossed with the Sundance Kid. In your case, the shooter is *change*. Life. The twenty-first-century marketplace. You don't have time to beg for a pause.

Hugely successful and always profitable Southwest Airlines prides itself on three company characteristics: *nimble*, *quick*, and *opportunistic*. How did Southwest Airlines get that way, and how does it keep it up? Whenever possible, Southwest flies in the face of bureaucracy—it stays lean, thinks small, keeps it simple . . . and more. As the big boys in the airline industry are fighting for their very survival, lean, mean Southwest flies on. They stay very light on their coils.

One way I've tried to prepare my four children for life is to teach them that fast-and-done is better than thorough-and-never-turned-in. Ninety-eight percent of suc-

cess today is showing up on time with something to show for yourself. To the speedy and fast adapters belong the spoils of our modern world. We don't have time to be as thorough as we did in the slow-moving world of the twentieth century. A friend of mine likes to tell me, "We can't wait for all the lights to turn green before we leave the house."

The longer it takes to make a decision, the less likely it will be a good one. We have to learn in today's climate to turn on a dime. Organizations trying to respond to outside forces successfully have to be rapid-action strike forces. They need employees who can corner quickly. Who can deploy faster than the troops of Desert Storm? Who can adapt to a new environment faster than a chameleon on espresso? Jim Crowe of Level 3 Communications is known to live by this mantra, "Take risks, learn quickly from your mistakes, and above all . . . do not stand still."

A Sense of Urgency

Who has time for a slow adjustment process? By the time some people adjust to the new, it has become the old that no longer works. Today's successful groups don't have time for individuals to gear down while people decide whether they will get on board or not. Change has to be on-the-fly, like the difference between old-time Jeeps—which required you to stop the car, get out, and turn a large knob in order to shift in or out of four-wheel drive—and the new, push-a-button-and-it's-done models. As much as I love vintage Jeeps, the problem with the old models was that if you found yourself on the kind of

perilous mountainside that required an immediate shift change, then you were literally in the scariest place on earth to stop your momentum, slam on your emergency brake, and climb out into the elements.

Nice and neat are out. Operate with a strong sense of urgency. Accelerate even if it means your product or program has rough edges. You have to be light on your feet to be a good agent of change.

It's been said that revolutions throw people into three different roles or modes of performance: those who *lead* the revolution, those who *follow it*, and those who *sleep* through it. "These days," says Karl Albrecht in his book *The Northbound Train*, "the sleepers are in real trouble. What you don't know can kill you." We cannot be asleep at the wheel of our organization in times like these.

Are you out of breath yet? Tired of running up and down the stairs chasing Slinky? Ready to hop off the speeding train of the twenty-first century? This book is about the change crisis. You've heard it said before, probably, but it bears repeating:

CHANGE ITSELF IS CHANGING. →

At a recent World Economic Forum, Microsoft founder and chairman Bill Gates declared, "The first ten years of this twenty-first century will be the digital decade." To illustrate the point, look at these numbers: It took forty years for radio to gain fifty million domestic listeners in the United States. Then it took only thirteen years for television and cable TV to gain fifty million viewers. And the Internet? It took only four years to gain fifty million domestic users.

With the advent of hand-held computers (known as personal digital assistants, or PDAs) and wireless phones, Internet usage worldwide will exceed 1.1 billion in 2005. That means one of every six residents of planet earth will be using the Internet in 2005.¹ And look at the explosion of cell phone usage. Today there are already one billion mobile phone users worldwide. China is adding five million new cell users per month! By 2003 there were more non-PC devices (cellular phones and PDAs) than PCs hooked up to the Internet.² It won't be long before most cars are hooked up to the Internet. Are there other revolutions around the corner as foundation-shaking as the Internet Revolution?

Sure there are. Probably a dozen.

Name an age-old problem you hardly even imagined would be turned on its ear. I can name an upcoming technology with a strong chance of solving it within the next twenty years. And then the new solution will create three more problems (*challenges*, remember; or better yet, *opportunities*) we never dreamed of. Some of those age-old problems needing solutions?

- Finite reserves of fossil fuel
- World hunger
- Topsoil depletion and dwindling agriculture
- Water shortages
- Air pollution
- Environmental toxins
- Disease
- Terrorism
- Poverty, or the relative scarcity of material goods

- Overcrowding
- Inner-city squalor
- And a hundred others

You name it, and if your organization is founded upon solving the last millennium's paradigms, you're in trouble. I'm not telling you to abandon your mission, but rather to work very, very hard at keeping your coils light. Get ready to adapt to changes of a magnitude that will make your head spin.

My second point about keeping your coils light is probably the more difficult and subtle one. After all, anyone can talk about staying light on your feet and nimble. But how do you *do it*? How does one remove the debris weighing him or her down once it's accumulated? Most of us aren't a Slinky right out of the box, shiny and pristine. Most of us have been tossed around houses and play boxes and built up quite a coating of heavy residue in the process.

Let's take the rapid deployment force mentioned earlier. As someone who lives not forty miles from one of the biggest air force bases in the West, I know what an incredible mobile force the armed forces has built up in order to achieve that quick response capability. I've seen it on the rails just in the last few months as car after car of armored personnel carriers and tanks and Humvees have hurtled past on their way to distribution centers. The military infrastructure has taken new generations of transport ships and cargo planes, as well as a complete reorganization of yesterday's base and command structure. The old way of organizing a military installation has been turned on its head in the last few years.

And all for the purpose of being able to mobilize people and material to whisk them across the planet in a matter of a few weeks—working toward a matter of days.

That's fine, you say. But I'm not in the U.S. Air Force. Nor am I even the equivalent of a general in my organization.

Leaving Behind Resistance . . . and Nostalgia

You may not have the authority or the ability to shift huge amounts of machinery in order to stay light on your coils. But you can do it in your head—and that may be far more important. You can work hard at keeping your mental functions free of barnacles, clean of cobwebs, and devoid of inertia and resistance.

One of the most potent and challenging examples of this is to rid your mind—your workaday business mind, at least—of nostalgia, of emotional attachment to “The Way Things Were.”

Now, please don't get the wrong idea. Privately, I'm capable of enormous amounts of nostalgia. And that's entirely appropriate. But I force myself to keep that out of my working-world life.

A colleague recently told me about a famous old downtown department store. It had stood for over a century in its own rambling fortress of a Victorian building. The family name for which it was called was still traced in brick along its front facade. Just a few years ago people still spoke of it in reverent tones: its dusty, wood-paneled counters, its floors filled with sleepy, arcane merchandise, the antique elevator with its elderly operator who asked you for your floor, and the pneumatic tubes that whisked

money away to a hidden cashier for your change.

It was a place you brought your kids for a deep whiff of yesteryear.

But invariably, you walked out without buying anything. Recently, the store went bankrupt. (How could it not, when huge monoliths like K-Mart couldn't even keep up?) Its vast building was unceremoniously converted into modern, *tres chic* office space. An Internet firm's suite now occupies the building's expensively refurbished third floor. My colleague attended the office opening. Rather than thinking "how sad," or "what an outrage," he found himself thinking, "What a great use for the old lady!"

Nostalgia doesn't outlast change. It never can. It belongs in your family life, but not in business.

I'll say it again. Change is a juggernaut. But if you allow yourself to be weighed down by a meritless attachment to yesteryear, you won't stand a chance.

What's the Point? Keep your coils light. To survive in any organization today requires a willingness to be flexible. Accept the need for change. We have to stay light on our feet, ready to dance and move at a moment's notice. Slow and heavy are out. Lightness and nimbleness are the keys to developing the rapid response time that is so essential to survival in today's change-laden environment. People in your group who push the change envelope should be rewarded for taking you to the future, not punished as rebels to the status quo.

TAKEAWAYS

1. *What forms of mental and physical residue are holding your organization back from being light on its feet?*

2. *What things do you do now because it is the way you have always done them? What things do you do because it has been company policy as long as you can remember? Ask yourself, “Why/when did it start?” Remember that today’s problems are yesterday’s solutions. Ask yourself, “Does it make sense today?”*

3. *Would you get rid of that way of doing things today if you could? List the barriers to changing the way of doing things if you answered yes.*

4. *How many permission slips have to be signed in your organization before you can start to change anything? Can that approval process be simplified and streamlined? Can a few be empowered to make change decisions?*

5. *What mental tactics and strategies can you employ to build responsiveness into your own personal arsenal—and then that of your organization?*

6. *How are your coworkers treated when they report needs for change in systems, products, or services? Is it safe for them to bring a bad report to management? The first rule of successful change is to stare reality square in the face and admit your problems. Don’t shoot the messengers.*