

Seven keys to overcoming stagnation in one's life

By Hans Steckling and Serge Roux-Levrat

Summary: It is all too easy to fall into all sorts of routines, and become so entrenched in them that we stagnate. And just like standing water, we begin to muddle up, to breed bacteria, even to “smell”. However, if we can manage to stay stirred up, by moving, by growing, by daring, we can become as fresh and full of life as running water!



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We have a burning desire to see executives live passionately, unlock their true potential, and lead balanced lives. However, we are all too aware of the fact that they cannot do so if they become stagnant, preoccupied, or extremely busy and overly involved. Sometimes, we may not even notice that we have simply shifted gear into “autopilot”. The truth is that we can all become stagnant if we do not keep ourselves stirred up.

What dangers await us if we do not pay attention to this issue? We can get great insight here by observing what happens to stagnating water. We all know that pools of standing or slow-flowing water provide an excellent environment to all kinds of bacteria and other parasites. Additionally, they are usually murky and smelly. All in all, stagnant water is an ideal breeding ground for things that are anything but good for us.

On the contrary, running water stays fresh, doesn't grow mold and helps maintain life. Moreover, it varies in terms of the level and speed of the current, keeping us on our toes (i.e. flexible). The same can happen to us. When we become stagnant, we slowly, but surely, plant seeds in our lives that have the potential to harm us (and others) directly or indirectly. Stagnation can happen in our careers for example, but also in our marriages, professional relationships

and friendships as well as in many other areas. **How can we avoid becoming stagnant and eventually burnt-out?**

Firstly, by growing and learning. It is pretty obvious: anyone who is not growing is on his way to becoming stagnant. Leaders have not only the responsibility of ensuring that they keep growing (in all aspects of their lives) and unlocking their potential, but they must also ensure that their team members stay stirred up as well.

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Can we grow if we do not know our real strengths and weaknesses? No. Can we grow if we do not know how others perceive us? No. Can we grow if we are always on the defensive whenever someone makes a constructive criticism or tell us how we are perceived? No. We could continue with a long list of similar questions, but we are sure that you've gotten our point already: to grow, we must face reality, be open and courageous, as well as know where we should gain more experience or learn new skills. It is not a once-and-

for-all process, but a continuous one. One strength can become a weakness and vice-versa. Growing should be a journey, and not a destination. Too many executives believe that they do not need to learn many new things when they reach 30, 40 years or beyond. But they couldn't be further from the truth. As Marshall Goldsmith mentions in his book "What got you here, won't get you there", successful people become more successful by constantly discovering the habits that they need to break. Often, there is simply a need to relearn to learn, as we experience in our talent agenting work. By growing and learning, we do not just avoid stagnation, but we also purify ourselves in the process; i.e. we become a better us.

Secondly, by changing the questions we routinely ask ourselves. In her book "Change your questions, change your life", Marilee Adams shows us how to avoid following a judger path (i.e. judging ourselves or others with a blame focus) that can only lead to stagnation, frustration and clear under-performance in the medium term.

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Einstein said that insanity is all about doing the same thing over and over again

and expecting different results. This often happens when an executive operates in the "autopilot" mode. It is the same thing with questions: how can we grow if we keep asking ourselves the same questions over and over again? Strange as it may seem, we often see leaders falling into this trap. As Marilee Adams rightly points out, we all take the judger path (being judgmental on either ourselves or others) at one point or another.

The trick is to realize that we have gone on the wrong track and switch lanes by changing our questions. For example, instead of asking himself, "why has my team unperformed again?", a leader should change his question to: how can I help my team outperform next time? It is too simple for many, but it works 100 percent of the time. Realizing that we have gone the wrong way gives us the ability to choose what to do next: to remain on the stagnation path or to switch to the learner path. What's certain is that without highly developed self-awareness and reflection skills, we stand little chance of victory: stagnation is then reinforced!

By putting the power of questions to work in our private or professional lives, we can reap tremendous results. How many teams have produced peak performances thanks to their leaders who changed the questions they routinely used to ask? Countless, judging from our own talent agenting experience.

Thirdly, by trying new things and repeatedly getting off the boat (see article of last month).

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Theodore Roosevelt once said that "It's not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, who, at the best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if he fails, at least he fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat".

We should not give in to fear of the unknown, of being entrepreneurial, of trying new ways and approaches, or of taking new roads and so on. Otherwise, stagnation could be right at our door. When trying new things, even the seemingly low payoff actions can, in fact, rejuvenate us. For example, we may just be used to taking our lunches at our work desk. Why not then break this routine and go out to lunch more often to meet new people and gain some fresh, different perspective. We may just be used to taking the same road to go to work. Changing our itinerary will refresh us.

We do not need always to take big risks to get rewarded. As a matter of fact, it is amazing to see how much these "little" actions can pay off. We have only one life and who really wants

to reach an old age and have nothing but regrets? Trying new things is one of the surest ways to guard ourselves against the dangers of stagnation. If you have trouble turning the corner, we encourage you to ask yourself the following question: what's the one thing that I could do, that if I do it on a regular basis, would make a tremendous positive difference to my life?

Fourthly, by valuing not-knowing. How can we discover new paths and breakthroughs if we believe that we know it all already? How many teams are stagnating because their leaders believe that they know it all? Too many, unfortunately. Instead of defending their (old) opinions, leaders should welcome more often the fresh ideas of their peers, subordinates or employees.

Too often (and on the excuse that the work must be speedily done), leaders operate in that autopilot and self-righteous mode: they know what's better. It is then not surprising that, over time, their teams lose their passion and drive. In such teams, people suffocate and stagnate! The worse thing that we frequently see happening is that the leaders of such teams start to blame their people for the stagnation, when in fact they are the main root cause of the problem. It is very difficult to invent new things or make a breakthrough with a know-it-all mentality. Without a regular input of new things, we can easily lose our freshness, just as water does.

Fifthly, by embracing diversity. Diversity is like a catalyst, helping teams

perform well beyond what is normally possible. It ensures that different viewpoints or ways of doing things are considered. It ensures that we have on board the planners, the scribes, the visionaries, etc. Diversity enriches and has the same effect as the current on water: too much and it can diminish the purity of water (i.e. make teams ineffective), too little and the water risks becoming stagnant, with all its negative effects (i.e. teams are at risk of underperforming). Diversity should be looked at holistically, incorporating many different dimensions: age, gender, culture, education, industry background, and wealth of experience.

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Do you have the right mix in your team? Do you understand which preferred roles the individuals are taking beyond their functional responsibilities? All too often, we see leaders fishing for new talents in the same old pool!

Sixthly, by avoiding extreme focus. Focus is good and should be aimed at. It renders us effective and efficient. However, when our focus is too extreme (and for too long), then we move into out-balance and stagnate, at best, in all the other areas of our life (e.g. in our marriage, friendships, sport, hobby or spiritual lives). What usually started as an advantage can

then rapidly become a major drawback. Indeed, the areas where we stand still can rapidly act as cancer cells. As such, they tend to multiply and spread around. In the end, we tend to fence them off in order to protect ourselves from further destruction.

However, in doing so, we give further fuel to stagnation which becomes a breeding pond of destructive habits. It is not unusual then, at one point or another, to lose the motivation and drive in our focused area, leading to a feeling of complete emptiness or failure. We are then subject to depression or worse. It is therefore critical that we ensure that we do not focus for too long on solely one or two areas of our lives.

What we must also realize is that by regenerating ourselves in our non-focused areas, we enhance our ability to add value and find joy in our focused areas. The two sides go hand in hand. It is easy for most of us to fall into the extreme focus trap. What's therefore important is that we realize when we are out-of-balance and that we take corrective action as soon as possible. It calls again for developed self-awareness and self-observation skills! Additionally, it's worth remembering, as Sydney Smith said, that obstacles are those frightful things we see when we take our eyes off our goals!

Finally, by believing in ourselves. This may sound strange, but many people give up too easily on themselves. They have lost hope and focus: the hope of being able to grow further, learn new things, adapt and

so on. Believe in your vision and set clear goals. The truth is (and we cannot overstate it) that we have far more potential that we can ever imagine.

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If we accept the pain of change, are ready to be coached and are patient, we can change and grow. We must ensure that we do not put too much weight on our weaknesses and that we do not underestimate our strengths. Comparing or benchmarking ourselves against others can be a great thing, but it can also be a destructive habit. We may never find that we are good enough in any area.

However, our strengths may not come from a specific dimension, but through our ability to play on several average strengths and transforming this combined package into a superior strength. Even if life has not been good to us until now, we may well find out that all the trials and tribulations that we have gone through could serve as the foundation for our future success. We may have to change direction, but there is always hope and alternatives. We can create beauty out of ashes. The choice is always ours.

Believing in ourselves and the great future that we can build for us is fundamental if we do not want to stagnate. It will energize us to stand up again when life beats us

down. We have helped many executives realize: “yes, I can do it”.

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We hope the above seven keys to overcoming stagnation in your life will help you stay stirred up. There are times when we should make a major change in our life, but very often all that is required is that we manage the seven keys in a proactive manner. It is our job to stir ourselves right where we are.

All too often, we do not even realize that we are sitting on top of jewels. It is all too easy to look at someone else's life and imagine that it is better than ours, but this is wrong. Living passionately (the opposite of stagnation) is a decision that we must all make and entails that we do our part. What concerns us, in our role as talent agents, are those people who are, for example, constantly trying new things and never finishing anything. Although trying new things is generally a good thing, for some people this is a form of stagnation: they are merely running away from their problems and thus avoiding learning the lessons they need to grow and mature.

The secret is to do the little things that make a big difference. When we think of passion and drive, too many of us immediately think of big or bold undertakings and then wonder how we can accomplish them. The tasks look daunting and even demotivating. However, the little steps we can take by implementing some of the above seven keys to avoiding stagnation can be

just as effective, if not more powerful. For instance, showing appreciation can save a stagnating working relationship. Stopping to work on Sundays can change a family's life and increase our energy level. Thanking an employee for the suggestion he just made (instead of feeling attacked in our need to appear as the one who gets the answers) can ultimately lead to new processes or innovations and higher employee engagement. We are strong advocates of paying big attention to the little things in life.

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In our talent agenting work, we always encourage the executives we accompany to find out the little things that they can do in each of the above seven keys in order to live passionately. We challenge you to do the same: your passion will grow and it won't be long before you reap great rewards.