



Bigger problems = better life

By:

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“Every business will always have problems... A good business has interesting problems, a bad business has boring ones. Good management is the art of making the problems so interesting and their solutions so constructive that everyone wants to get to work and deal with them... Good problems energize. Bad problems enervate.”

Paul Hawken: *Growing a Business*

The faster you ride, the stronger the headwind. If you hop on your bike on a perfectly still day and start down the road at ten miles per hour, the wind in your face will feel the same as it would standing still in a ten mile per hour breeze. Crank it up to fifteen mph and it will *feel* like the wind has more than doubled its velocity. It's the same in life. The faster you're moving, the stiffer the resistance you're likely to encounter. It's important to know this for two reasons. First, increasing resistance can be an early warning signal that you're perhaps moving too fast. The overly aggressive salesperson who can't figure out why he doesn't close as many deals as his more laid-back counterpart might become more productive by paying better attention to the wind he's riding into.

When I was a young hospital administrator, I seemed to have run into more than my share of relationship problems. The usually wasn't because I was doing the wrong thing. Rather, it was that I was doing the right thing, but doing it too fast, before having taken the time to inform effected parties and build consensus behind the decision or action. Had I taken the time to better understand the resistance, I would have slowed down and built a more solid foundation before plowing ahead into the wind.

The second reason it's important to understand this phenomenon, however, is that a stiff headwind could well be an indicator of huge opportunity if you keep on pedaling into it. When Herb Kelleher and Rollin King sketched out the plan for Southwest Airlines on the back of a cocktail napkin in 1966, they had no idea of the hurricane of resistance they would stir up. Their intended competitors held them up with court delays for six years before they were able to get their first plane in the air. Bill McGowan and his team at MCI had to ride into a similar headwind in their fight to pry a share of the telecommunications market away from the (then) AT&T monopoly. By pedaling into the wind, leaders of MCI and Southwest Airlines changed the world.

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Sometimes the headwind is more benign, but no less hindering. Almost every entrepreneur can tell you of well-meaning friends and family members who encouraged a go-slow (or no-go) approach, when what was warranted was a flat-out sprint to, in the words of the Confederate cavalry officer Nathan Bedford Forrest, to “get there firstest with the mostest.”

The most pernicious headwinds are the ones we create for ourselves. Fear of success, ambivalence about money, and low self-esteem can all lead to self-sabotaging behavior when it feels like things are going too well, like we’re moving too fast. To give in to this headwind will not make you more secure. In this dynamic and turbulent world, trying to avoid risk – slowing down when resistance increases – can actually make you less secure. There are times when we must, to quote the memorable title of Susan Jeffers’ book – “feel the fear and do it anyway.”

How do you know when a headwind is an indication that it’s time to slow down and build consensus, and when it’s a signal that you must really be onto something with huge potential to have provoked such a reaction, so “damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead?” There’s no easy answer. But here’s a clue I always look for: if the cause of the resistance has a vested interest in maintaining the status quo – whether it’s an outside competitor trying to keep you out of its market or inner resistance trying to keep you from quitting a boring job to start a business doing work you love – then it’s time to shift into a higher gear, put your head down, and fly.

On the other hand, if the one causing the resistance could really benefit from the change you’re trying to bring about, and would likely become a tailwind if properly informed of the rationale, pulling off to the side of the road to communicate more clearly about where you are going, and why you’re in such a hurry to get there, might result in your ultimately going farther, faster, than trying to bulldoze your way headlong through the tempest.