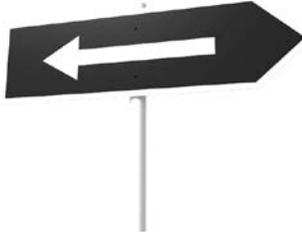


Is it Time to Take a Step Backward?

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Have you ever had to take a step backward in your career, perhaps accept a lesser position or lower compensation? Or a step backward in a project to rework something? Or a step backward in the marketplace—deferring a near-term opportunity in favor of a longer-term one? Or a step backward in a relationship where you needed to spend less time with or stop seeing someone for a period of time? The path forward isn't always a straight line.

If you've ever gone backward in life you've probably found it difficult at best. As most of us are achievement oriented, we push forward, not backward. We look for ways to make progress, not digress. We don't like the thought of giving up ground. Psychological studies confirm this. People place more value on what they have than what they don't have. People will spend more money to keep something than to replace it. Yet sometimes digressing or giving up something, at least temporarily, is exactly what we need in order to grow and succeed in the long-term. If we are currently in or approaching an unsustainable set of circumstances, we may need to stop and take a step backward.

Going backward can be a trivial decision or a life-changing one. It can involve a minor inconvenience or a major overhaul. It can be a brand new career or a slight role change. It can be the development of an entire new product or making fixes to an existing product. It can be a cooling off period in an existing relationship or the pursuit of a new relationship.

When faced with the decision to keep forging ahead or taking a step backward, the first decision is "can I make what I'm currently doing work by continuing ahead?" If the answer is "no" then the next question is "how far backward do I need to go?" You generally wouldn't need to go back to the very beginning or want to give up any more ground than you have to. Any amount of going backward can be tough, but starting over can be overwhelming. You don't need to re-write your entire software program if most of the modules are still usable. You don't need to build all new skills if you have existing skills you can leverage. You don't need to bulldoze your house to add on to your master bathroom. You don't need to end a marriage if all you need is to learn how to communicate constructively. You don't need an extreme surgical procedure if what you really need is to eat properly and exercise. Starting over may seem attractive, but it can create as many new problems as it appears to eliminate. While it may seem like the easiest option, it can be the laziest which is rarely the best.

When confronting difficult issues, address the source of them without creating unnecessary new ones. Only go back to the point the problem starts or where the wrong turn occurred. Only unwind the thread on the spindle to the point where it became tangled. Unless the spindle needs replacing too, leave it and the untangled thread alone. Keep what is working. Only go backward far enough to learn what needs to be learned and do what is needed to get back on track. Unless otherwise justified, only redo the part of your product, project, relationship, or self that needs to be redone. Once addressed, refocus on going forward. Let go of your prior concerns. Accept that you had to take a step backward. It's alright. It was actually part of a bigger step forward. As the cliché goes, just don't throw out the baby with the dirty bath water. Keep the baby!

Is it Time to Take a Step Backward?

Consider what part of your life – professional or personal – may no longer be sustainable. Are you dealing with a chronic issue that is so debilitating that you can no longer ignore it? Is the roadmap you are following getting so difficult and complicated that the effort is no longer justifiable? Are your habits moving you further away from your desired future instead of toward it? Has your job, project, or relationship become so dysfunctional that you can no longer handle it? Think about whatever might have deteriorated to the point where the effort exceeds the return. For those projects, people, and situations that have been increasingly difficult, ask yourself:

- Has this situation gotten to the point that the effort is no longer justified for the return I am getting?
- If I didn't have a bias to leverage my sunk costs, would I make a different investment at this point?
- Would the time, money, and effort of going backward be repaid in a reasonable time frame if I chose to stop and go backward?
- If I keep doing what I've been doing, will it merely exacerbate the situation?
- Am I putting another temporary fix in place that doesn't address the real issue?

If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, your situation is a candidate for stopping whatever you are doing and taking a step backward. Rather than perpetuating your difficulty another day, release, cycle, or occurrence, accept responsibility for making a change. Admit that maintaining the current direction isn't sustainable. Rather than continue to treat symptoms, decide to address the source. Rather than maintain the troublesome status quo, identify what needs to change. Is it you? Probably. Is it also someone or something else? Probably. Accept the need for change and rather than cover up, cope with, run from, or overlook the inevitable, decide to address it.

Once you have decided to stop and back-up, solicit the feedback and help of others. Seek wise counsel. Have the conversations that need to be had. Involve your key stakeholders. Do the research and analysis needed. Identify the issues to be addressed, learn any lessons to be learned, agree on the solution that solves the issues, and create the plan to be implemented. Do what is needed to start heading in the direction that enables the future you desire.

Take heart. Most every great advancement was preceded by a step backwards. Most every success was preceded by a failure. Most every self-improvement was preceded by adversity. It is through mistakes and obstacles that we gain experience and grow.

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