



// Even though it may be frightening to venture outside of your company's comfort zone, opportunities for heightened success rarely originate there.

THE
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OPPORTUNITY ZONE

Getting out of your comfort zone is essential to continued and sustainable success.

By Marty Jacknis

It's a tough economic market. So, why are countless individuals and businesses today missing opportunities that could propel them ahead? Failure to recognize these openings is partly to blame, but even more likely is the hesitation that comes from being stuck in a comfort zone.

The term "comfort zone," which Merriam-Webster defines as "the level at which one functions with ease and familiarity," suggests a desirable life and work existence. Additionally, since this Nirvana-like state typically requires significant knowledge, experience and/or training to achieve, it is often associated with success. So it is understandable most people perceive being in the comfort zone as a safe, non-threatening, non-demanding state, whereas stepping out of the comfort zone is risky.

Yet, growth rarely sprouts from resistance to change or a willingness to do something different. In business, this concept rings particularly true. Hesitation to reach beyond the status quo significantly limits expansion and the likelihood of achieving a sustainable fu-

ture. But if company leaders could replace the negative association of stepping out of the comfort zone with a more positive vision, CEOs and managers could change their employees' perceptions of success. Then they could replace the fear of risk with the excitement and possibility of new ways to excel.

Understanding Comfort Zones

Most people readily admit experiencing euphoria, confidence and satisfaction after overcoming difficult challenges such as making a speech, delivering a well-received sales presentation or asking for a raise. So with such generous rewards, why hesitate to leave the comfort zone? Is it human nature?

Whether real or perceived, confinement in the comfort zone prohibits individuals from seeking, seeing, seizing and leveraging massive amounts of available untapped and unleveraged opportunities. Perceptions of loss, pain, defeat and humiliation keep them from venturing beyond self-imposed, restricted boundaries. As a result, growth is se-

verely limited. In business, this hesitation hinders success for both the employee and the company. When employees are reluctant to accept more responsibilities and challenges, the company fails to leverage its full potential, often resulting in lost revenue.

The Opportunity Zone

Yet, every company has top performers or "opportunity maximizers" who move beyond their comfort zones into opportunity zones on a frequent basis in order to grow the business. Why can't every employee be encouraged to realize his or her full potential in this way?

Raising the achievement bar and setting higher goals and greater expectations for all employees are possible when companies create an environment that encourages employees to seek and embrace new challenges and opportunities. In fact, as employee confidence increases, extending personal boundaries becomes second nature.

Understanding the comfort zone mentality and how it impacts business is the first step. Then adopting a proactive mindset with a visionary perspective is next. When individuals are engaged, they look for ways to move from comfort to opportunity, which keeps the ball and the company rolling in the right direction.

Envision a target where the center, the bull's eye, is the comfort zone. This small, encapsulated area, limited by design, is where most people function every day, offering minimal wiggle room for expansion. Unfortunately, most people are content to remain in the center of this target due to self-limiting belief systems and planning methodologies that hold them captive. Fear, anxiety, even physical

illness restrict their movement beyond these boundaries. The outside ring of this target, which can be referred to as the “capability boundary,” although moveable, represents the extent of most people’s limitations. These limitations often include financial, physical, intellectual, psychological and environmental restrictions, to name a few.

Most people are aware of their comfort zones and limitations, but they fail to recognize that sandwiched between the comfort zone and the capability boundary is an area brimming with infinite growth and opportunity potential. This “opportunity zone” is where top-performing individuals spend most of their time.

Utilizing the Opportunity Zone

Dane Lopes was only 27 years old when he applied for an internal company management position. “I was a good salesperson, but I had no management or insurance product and industry experience,” Lopes says. “I had to convince somebody I was worth the risk.” To give himself a leg up, he spoke directly to the hiring manager. “I wanted to make sure my resume was at least looked at.” Landing an interview, Lopes stepped into the opportunity zone in earnest. He sought counsel from knowledgeable people and even role-played the interview, practicing any and all possible questions. Though not qualified based on the job description and traditional criteria, he was hired and reduced his career climbing time frame by three to five years. Today, as senior vice-president of sales, US East Region, Swiss RE Corporate Solutions, he knows the importance of leaving the comfort zone. “A lot of people say they want to do things, but they seldom go be-



// Visionary planning is one of the tools your organization will need in order to make the transition from the comfort zone to opportunities.

yond planning into execution,” he says. “People are afraid of failure.”

Bob O’Connell, former chairman, president and CEO of Mass Mutual Financial Group, agrees. O’Connell believes managers should encourage employees to

achieve seemingly impossible goals. These might include developing a new product in record time, going from tenth to first in the market or generating exceptional revenue from products and distribution systems that didn’t exist a few



years earlier. Providing employees with inspiration, motivation and rewards for their efforts is also critical. “If people are achieving more than what they thought was possible and also setting high goals for themselves, then not only will they

succeed, but the entire organization wins. When the organization succeeds, then they wind up being rewarded. So it becomes a self-perpetuating cycle as people believe in themselves and create an organization that makes them feel even better about themselves.”

The Challenge for Business

Transitioning a business from a mentality which moves from comfort to opportunity increases productivity and success, but the flipside is also true. Remaining within comfort boundaries decreases chances for growth. So it’s important for CEOs and managers to address the comfort zone issue head-on – initially by focusing on their own comfort issues. Are they role-modeling a good example by taking on new challenges or by their own inaction, are they discouraging employees from moving forward? Creating an atmosphere that encourages outside-the-box action is essential. Follow these steps to make the transition a reality.

1. Create an opportunity maximizing culture. Introduce new methodologies that indicate a change from “business as usual.” Provide positive role-modeling and company-building experiential exercises, allowing everyone to tap into the company’s collective energy, intelligence and experience
2. Increase visionary planning. Discourage and eliminate any self-limiting belief systems and planning practices that aim too low.
3. Create customized, proactive “opportunity SWAT teams.” In the process, utilize experienced and knowledgeable personnel who actively seek and harvest potential unexplored and untapped opportunities.

4. Identify, quantify, and communicate the risks and rewards associated with leaving a comfort zone. Through analysis and discussion, agree on the upside and downside of venturing in the opportunity zone.
5. Establish “seemingly impossible goals” for all. Inspire, motivate, compensate and empower everyone to achieve those goals.
6. Provide the resources, tools and support necessary for success. Consider individual adversities to change and bring in outside assistance to facilitate a smooth transition when necessary.
7. Develop an introspective culture throughout the company. Utilize continuous analysis and improvement so that everyone learns from shared successes and disappointments.

Make the Transition

Company survival in today’s tough economic market demands taking advantage of every opportunity. To maximize success, leaders are called upon to continually venture outside their personal comfort zones. Equally important, however, is creating a culture, process and environment conducive to encouraging all employees to follow suit. Taking full advantage of the opportunity zone increases employee satisfaction and ultimately moves the company in the right direction. •*mt*

Marty Jacknis, an educator, consultant and executive, is executive vice president of Opportunity Maximizers Inc., a management, marketing, and sales consulting and training company. Visit the company’s website www.opportunitymaximizers.com. E-mail: marty@opportunitymaximizers.com