THE COMFORT ZONE

Your comfort zone

Where the magic happens

Are you in it?

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THE COMFORT ZONE
There is a strange phenomenon that often happens to individuals, companies and groups alike! I have witnessed it first hand and observed friends, employees and companies fall into its evil grasp. It's the comfort zone.

Firstly, my observations are not meant to be seen as negative but rather, a suggestion that in recognising the "Comfort Zone" may require you to look at the same area or people with a different set of eyes! Many people and companies probably up to 80 percent if you are a follower of the Pareto Principle (the 80/20 rule) are totally happy with what they believe is the norm.

Many tick along blissfully "doing what they do" arriving to work; hopefully making profits; passing each day either frantic or calm; or maybe even feast or famine. When you talk to the "Comfort Zone" victims they reply in rhetoric; " Yeah, mate we are always busy"; "Mate, we are too busy to take holiday"; or the killer of all – " You gotta do what you gotta do". Generally there are no key performance indicators, safety valves or systems that warn of pending disaster!
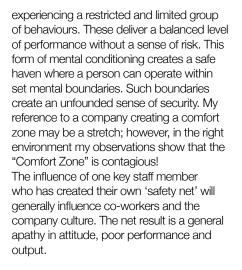
Victims of the "Comfort Zone" are blinded by the mediocrity or the illusion created by rarely ever stepping back to re-energize themselves about what they do and how they do it!

Personally, I suggest you unsubscribe from this insidious disease by agreeing to commit to saying; "NO you don't have to do, what you have to do" unless you have chosen that path.

The "Comfort Zone" is somewhat similar in nature to the information contained in "The eMyth" authored by Michael Gerber who offer words of wisdom along the lines of; "Have you taken what you love to do (make signs) and later turned it into a sign business. You later discover that you are no longer doing what you love to do because by that point you're stuck managing those who are doing what you love to do? (Ok, I adapted the last line to suit the sign and digital print game.) However, if you would invest a few dollars in reading "The eMyth", I'm sure you will discover some ideology that are both similar in characteristics and prevalent to that of the "Comfort Zone".

How to define the Comfort Zone?
The "Comfort Zone" is actually a behavioural state within which a person operates in an anxiety neutral condition while

experiencing a restricted and limited group of behaviours. These deliver a balanced level of performance without a sense of risk. This form of mental conditioning creates a safe haven where a person can operate within set mental boundaries. Such boundaries create an unfounded sense of security. My reference to a company creating a comfort zone may be a stretch; however, in the right environment my observations show that the "Comfort Zone" is contagious!

The influence of one key staff member who has created their own 'safety net' will generally influence co-workers and the company culture. The net result is a general apathy in attitude, poor performance and output.

What are the characteristics of the Comfort Zone?

The characteristics are many and varied depending on particular social groups, personalities or in companies (perhaps there's a culture that develops in good times versus bad times). The potential causes are way beyond the scope of this article. We should aim to focus on a remedy as the causes may well be out of your circle of influence.

First, we should raise an eyebrow and look for signs similar to the ones below;

- People who do not follow through, rather they have learnt or been taught that the final outcome isn't a focus.
- People who do not follow up a quote after spending hours researching, building and preparing the quote. One may question whether they are in the quoting business or the sign making business? My answer is that if one is prepared to invest the time in quoting then one must follow up, otherwise someone else will!
- Confusion over what is important versus what is urgent. Something that is "urgent" is almost always driven by customer expectations, whereas "important" items can be beneficial as it can provide long-term improvements to your business. Comments like; "We are always too busy to improve our systems!" in an effort to save time is the ironic consequence.
- The lack of output backed up by seemingly endless excuses and reasons why it can't be done. Simply put, it's a case of all talk but no action.
- A total lack-of-reality approach to the customer's deadlines.
- The habitual trail of evidence that may offer some insights into irregular behaviour.
- Rigidness in routine or bizarre events that may raise an eyebrow or two. If you ever

say to yourself; 'Wow, that's strange!", it's time to take action.

And the worst of all;

- The gradual acceptance of mediocrity – leading to the apparent slide from action orientated projects to ones that were once important become stalled, stopped, or even dead in their tracks.

A case study of the Comfort Zone

This is an actual study I can share with you with names withheld:

What is unusual about "Company A" is that its staff never learnt or didn't care as they had been empowered or inflated to be Prima Donnas who could do no wrong! That is a lesser problem when the business is making loads of profit. The staff lacked the understanding of fundamental business rules that must be adhered to or they created new rules on the fly. The owners had given the staff great freedom to run the once very profitable business as the staff saw fit. Of course they took control to run things how they see it! The staff gradually learnt to see work output as no longer urgent. They tend not to see that critical management structure as important. As profits slip the reality becomes clear to the owners. Tragically, the lack of staff key performance indicators allowed this to perpetuate. Additionally, the owners failed to take stock off the balance between "what is important versus what is urgent". A key to the problem is the hesitation of when to stop the rot or be resistant to do so. Simply put, they had become victims of the comfort zone as well. Like they say: You don't know what you don't know and hindsight is 20/20!

What are some points to look for?

Interestingly we see immediate turnarounds in weeks or months after the company or person may have languished in the "Comfort Zone" for years if action is taken. Perhaps these are examples you have witness yourself;

- Noticing when the company culture develops a "she'll be right" and it's ok if it gets done tomorrow in regard to customer projects, then act to question after you check the facts regarding the specifications, deadlines or other important facts.
- Review why internal business projects ALWAYS get put off – especially NON deadline items such as internal projects like business structure, marketing, job descriptions and organisation structure. One needs to set actions in place.

A simple tip is to treat one's own projects as a job, write it up, book it in and manage it with the same respect you would a valued customers project.

- Take notice of when work gets quiet or runs out, causing everybody to panic! All your internal work may not have even been considered. You may have a need to market the business's product and/ or perhaps you require job descriptions and other internal business protocols. However in the panic, clear vision is rare as no plan is in place. If this sounds familiar to you, then the course of action is simple – have a plan of action for your own projects.
- Halt the creeping procrastination. All of us only have a given amount of hours in a day. Therefore when there are projects that staff are not really interested in or inspired by is pushed on them, what is the outcome? Presumably, people will simply ignore, forget, dodge or side track those types of projects until they die out, potentially risking the customer and the business.

How can you break the comfort zone cycle?

The barrier you face is implementing change. Those in the "Comfort Zone" are conditioned to "what they are used to". They like things the way they are, why should they change it? You will hear rhetoric like; "We always do it this way". That is an indication to encourage skill development and provide training to assist growth.

A good leader will lead the way in helping those people to "step outside the box" they live/work in. Show them that it's OK to experiment and try new methods and techniques. This can eventually offer a new and different set of responses to re-educate the conditionings that they have been accustomed to.

The winners are companies that are committed to tackling the "Comfort Zone" problem. They are infinitely better off and more profitable than those that don't. It's that simple! They are the standouts in today's environment.