

Mature Mind & Positive Influence

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Abstract: In those moments when we feel least effective and most frustrated, and especially when this experience becomes chronic, we're aware of how it steals our capacity to get things done. Something has happened and continues to happen in our mind. Our mind is not working as well as we'd like it to. We're exhausted, perhaps irritable or indifferent, but certainly not positively charged. Our thinking is dulled, our judgment is compromised, our imagination and repertoire of problem-solving skills seem to have left us. And it's not just us; we seem unable to connect and influence others in any positive way. This is not what we want. We're stuck. We want change. And change can happen. That's what we'll discuss in what follows.

The I and the We

Some things we accomplish without direct help from others: setting our alarm, getting to work, making time to identify priorities and action plans for the day. Granted, we acquired some of these habits earlier in life from parents, teachers, and supervisors, but our training wheels are off now. We're independent, self-directing in many ways, productive through our own individual efforts.

This personal discipline defines how we arrive at work with a readiness to engage. But as important as it is in the beginning, we discover that we need more to be fully effective in an organization. Because once we're there, most of what we accomplish, get noticed for, and hope to achieve requires influence, positive influence. Our greatest impact involves mobilizing productive action at the system level.

Of course, the human system is moved mostly by motivating voluntarily aligned acts of collaboration. It often entails adaptive change. And people are guided by minds, rational mind and emotional mind, and by their interests, self-interest and common interests. And outside of the military, command and control usually won't suffice. Action is mediated by communication for understanding and for influence.

Interdependent action is less direct action, less swift, as compared to a discrete task-oriented procedure I perform independent of others. That's why organizational, even group or team, structure is necessary. But structure is more than assigning people to roles, establishing a hierarchy of authority, and creating procedures. If it's smart and adaptive, it includes enduring patterns of positive interpersonal relations.

The latter kind of structure is what I call *dynamic structure* in contrast to *formal structure*. Both are important. Formal structure provides a rational model for planning, staffing, and building an enterprise. It specifies the functional sub-systems needed to do our work and create value. Dynamic structure, on the other hand, generates the adaptive vitality that promotes learning and that sustains the motivation and spirit for doing the work.

Business is More than Making Music

We prize individuality in American culture. That is, until the other's interests differ or collide with ours! Hence the need for purposive organizations, strategy, and structure to motivate, moderate, and even to arrest some acts of individual initiative. Viable enterprises are coordinated systems of action, and their management's role is to orchestrate individual actions. Easier in good times than bad!

To orchestrate is to get brass, strings, woodwind, and percussion playing together off the same sheet of music. Conductors do this by using gestures — at least when it's show time. In business, the challenge is similar. Whether you're an officer-level executive or a team member who's expected to assert aligned acts of leadership based on your role and proximity to the action situation, you must influence others.

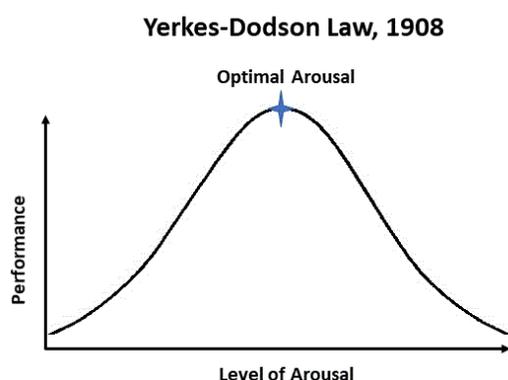
The efficacy of your leadership and collaboration is shaped by "rehearsal" over time. Those you lead acquire clear expectations of their roles and their vital contributions to the overall performance. They learn how to shape their individual performances in relation to that of others and to the whole. They cultivate the skill of using feedback to shape performance. Lines of communication are opened.

But there's a difference: An orchestra prepares for *periodic performance events*, while a business must prepare for and deliver a *continuous stream of parallel performances*. The former calls for near-perfect execution. It's about one audience, one performance, with no do-overs. In business, quality is critical, but we must also ensure that the perfect does not become the enemy of the good.

Other differences arise from the fact that in most businesses, performance requires a continuous line of coordinated action over a protracted period of time and across multiple projects. This factor has been expressed in the observation of mathematician Augustus De Morgan (1866): "*What-ever can happen will happen if we make trials enough.*"

The more popular expression of this phenomenon is Murphy's law: "*Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.*" In its most positive and constructive sense, this adage causes us to recognize that business is an experimental exercise. We must learn as we go. We cannot halt action because the possibility of error exists. We're expected to anticipate as best we can and adapt to achieve the end.

But the more we take on — number of projects, complexity, tight time frames, resource limitations — the more demanding our experience will be. People become stretched, strained, and fatigued. Just as the level of challenge and requirements for adaptation become greatest, we find our capacities for adaptive action declining due to mental, emotional, and physical fatigue. Communication breaks down.



This phenomenon, like the underlying logic of Murphy's law, has been known for some time. See the graphical illustration of this phenomenon authored in 1908 by two psychologists. This inverted U-shaped curve has been used extensively in psychology to portray the effects of stress on coping resources. But I have used the curve to suggest how adaptive interventions can avert the sharp decline in performance, which of course is due to the "decompensation" of our cultivated capacities. (See my whitepaper on [*Development at the Inflection Point*](#) for more on adaptive leader development.)

Anticipate Challenge, Avert Decompensation

As the level of challenge (arousal) increases, our capacity to function effectively, mentally, emotionally, socially, and practically, grows... up to a point. At this *inflection point* (optimal arousal), and unless we

find a way to lessen the level of demand or bolster our capacities to cope with these demands, we will experience a sharp decline. There are important things we can do to change this outcome.¹

The theme of adaptive development is not new. In fact, one area of professional psychology, Counseling Psychology, took this theme as its guiding vision of human nature, i.e., that we are adaptable, that we can learn, grow, change, and thrive, even in extreme situations, with help. This view is shared by some philosophers and by others outside psychology, e.g., Viktor Frankl in *Man's Search for Meaning*.²

It's an optimistic view, but it is tempered by an appreciation for how conditions in our environment affect us, and how vulnerabilities arising from our developmental history can make us more susceptible to stress and strain. So, whether our challenges stem from the roles we take or from factors beyond our control — a market crash or bereavement — coping skills and resilience are critical.

Thus, noticing signs of growing stress, strain, and decompensation is key to our success. Cognitive flexibility and abilities to navigate complexity yield to mental rigidity, narrowness, and dichotomous thinking. Emotions intensify, arousing reactive tendencies. Feelings operate without the mediation and moderation of rational mind. They can be seen as an absolute reality we're helpless to change.

There is no shame in noticing we're overwhelmed. In striving to do our best, to learn and grow, we may at times reach too far, or perhaps life throws us a curve ball. Wisdom is born of the humility to recognize when this happens and to "stop digging," as the adage goes. We need to regain access to our rational mind, examine our felt experience, and reconsider our situation, challenges, and choices.

Regaining a Sense of Internal Control

Let's recall our initial discussion of how important interpersonal communications and positive influence are in sustaining adaptive action and productive performance. This truth is not only relevant at work. It applies to our personal, developmental efforts too. We need the help of others. We're social creatures. And if we are feeling stuck and overwhelmed, a helping relationship is indicated.

We may find this help at home with a spouse or partner who's a good listener, who's able to encourage us, share feedback or advice about changes that might help, e.g., resuming a work-out routine, finding time to relax, getting more sleep. They may even be someone who is able to help us reconsider our work style or way of dealing with issues at work.

However, if your feelings of being stuck have become so strongly rooted that they've affected your mood, motivation, and ability to function at work, it may be time to seek professional help. Perhaps a coach can help, but sometimes these moments of distress reveal deeper vulnerabilities and needs.

The most important thing is DON'T RUN! If you're feeling deeply stuck and discouraged, you've probably already started to retreat a bit from relationships or from speaking up and projecting energy into a team meeting. It's natural when you're feeling less able, less confident, less like your old self.

¹ Again, I refer the reader to my whitepaper on [development at the inflection point](#) for more. For now, suffice it to say that most adaptive development involves timely intervention, perspective taking, and a reflective pause.

² Viktor E. Frankl wrote this book on coping with overwhelming conditions of maltreatment from a first-person point of view. He was professor of neurology and psychiatry at the University of Vienna Medical School until his death in 1997. His twenty-nine books have been translated into twenty-one languages. During World War II, he spent three years in Auschwitz, Dachau, and other concentration camps.

Feelings of fear and fatigue, patterns of avoidance, and anxious or depressive symptoms are telling us something. They're telling us we need to learn something about ourselves, about our situation, and about how to approach life and work differently. Take it as an awakening. Have faith that there is a silver lining in this problem state — because there usually is.

Chronicity is another word for habit. In this case, it consists of habits of mind, emotion, and action that leave us paralyzed. But notice, you've made it this far in life. So, you have resources and probably some relationships that can and will serve you well. But that doesn't mean that they alone will get you through your present problem situation.

Your first habits in life were learned, just as any new habits must be learned. Many of the old ones will continue to be helpful. And learning new ones may even reinvigorate and extend the impact of some of those established habits and skilled practices. But the paradoxical thing about learning is that we can also "learn" that learning-based change is not possible — but that's a false learning.

A mature mind is one that is informed of problems early, usually by our feelings. It takes this experience as a signal to intervene. The intervention will almost always include the positive influence of a helpful other. It's through that helping relationship that we, in turn, regain our capacity to assert positive influence on others. A rather virtuous circle isn't it?