

Orbiting the Giant Hairball.....

Gordon MacKenzie worked at Hallmark for exactly 30 years — to the day. His role was to *create* for the giant greeting card company.

"So create I did," MacKenzie wrote in *Orbiting the Giant Hairball*:

But during those 30 years, there was not a day when I was not subject to the inexorable pull of Corporate Gravity tug, tug, tugging me toward (and, one unhappy year, right into) the tangle of the Hairball, where the ghosts of past successes outvote original thinking.

Nothing foreshadows failure like success. As Tom Peters records in *Re-imagine!*, 70 years after the granddaddy of business lists, the 1917 *Forbes 100*, 61 of the top 100 companies were gone and many of the survivors underperformed the stock market over time. The *Standard and Poor's 500* list appeared in 1957. In 1997 only 74 of those companies remained (80 percent death rate!) and just 12 outperformed the market in those four decades (Re-imagine! DK, 2003, p 35).

On the way to getting big, most companies turn into Giant Hairballs. Not on purpose; it just happens. Two hairs get tangled — not because they *don't* work but because on some level, for someone, they work just fine. As it is joined by more and more hairs, each of which worked well enough somewhere for someone, the tangle becomes more complex and larger. Before you know it there's a ball of hair so big it has its own gravity field strong enough to pull . . . *almost anything* . . . *nearly anyone* . . . into its mass. That force field is *success*. The Hairball prefers repeating established processes to the risks of innovation and creativity because repeating those processes *works* — every day until it stops working. It is no overstatement to say *Hairball gravity sucks*.

To take the ability to create, you must spiritually soar into the thin air of the stratosphere — blue sky — where it is possible "*to bring into existence*" from nothing an original concept. Hairballs detest thin air like nature abhors a vacuum. A concrete world where precedents take precedence is a reality more to a Hairball's liking. A world honeycombed with the established guidelines techniques, methodologies, systems and equations that are the heart of a Hairball's gravity.

There are two ways out of the Hairball:

1. *Getting Sent Away* — When repeating the processes associated with past success stops working; Giant Hairballs cut a handful or a hundred or 16,000 people from the payroll — usually whatever the outside advisor (or overseer) recommends.
2. *Going Away* — People who just can't stand it anymore, go off on their own. Some get sucked into a different Hairball (too bad); some form Hairballs of their own (lesson not learned); a few learn to create dynamic self-regenerating businesses.

Gordon MacKenzie offers a *middle way*: Learn to Orbit the Giant Hairball.

Orbiting is responsible creativity: vigorously exploring and operating beyond the Hairball of the corporate mindset, beyond "*accepted models, patterns, or standards*" — all the while remaining connected to the spirit of the corporate mission.

People who get *sent away* from a Giant Hairball have little choice but to adapt and make the best of it. The further up the organization a person is when the boss hits the eject button, the more likely he is to have a soft landing (thank God for executive parachutes — and hope they were properly packed — pity the worker who is merely dispensable).

People who *go away* may be making an unnecessarily drastic choice (though who ever knows for sure?).

To find Orbit around a corporate Hairball is to find a place of balance where you benefit from the physical, intellectual and philosophical resources of the organization without becoming entombed in the bureaucracy of the institution.

Remember, Hairballs don't set out to become Hairballs. It is an unintended consequence. Organizations don't get big because they are stupid and usually not even in spite of being stupid. Every Hairball has plenty of smart people, loads of experience and expertise and maybe even some money in the bank. These are resources that can enable would-be Orbiters to set a trajectory that creates value for the company and its stakeholders in a way that is sustainable (where *sustainable* includes the ability to live with the process as well as the outcome). Learning to create — or even become — a profit center Orbiting around a Giant Hairball may be within the reach of most anyone smart and capable enough to get hired in the first place. But it is not without risk.

If you are interested (and it is not for everyone), you can achieve Orbit by finding the personal courage to be genuine and to take the best course of action to get the job done rather than following the pallid path of corporate appropriateness.

Personal courage... Mike Vance quotes Buckminster Fuller on the dynamics of change: "You never change anything by fighting it; you change things by making them obsolete through superior technology" (*Think Out of the Box*, Career Press, p 138). If that were easy, everyone would do it. Jesus addressed the issue similarly:

No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.
— Matthew 9:16-17 [New International Version]

Finding the courage to make new wineskins, to weave new cloth, to swim against the tide of convention, be it in a spiritual tradition, a business or a business category, is the stuff of a rich and disciplined interior life not available in any store.

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