

Boiling the Frog

Stephen R Balzac

There is an old and hoary claim that if you put a frog in boiling water, it will immediately jump out, but if you put it in cold water and slowly increase the temperature, the frog will sit there until it cooks. In fact, this happens only if the frog is equipped with little frog cement galoshes rendering it unable to jump: frogs are too smart to be boiled alive. They leave long before the water gets hot enough to cook them. Why, then, does this story have such longevity?

In my experience in the high tech world, I often find that they are sitting in some very hot water indeed. One might think that they would have noticed the warning signs as the heat increased, but apparently not. In fact, they are tolerating, or even accepting as normal, conditions that leave outsiders shocked. Rarely did conditions start off as bad as they became; rather, they became worse and worse over time until the water was boiling. This can make it difficult to recruit new talent or to keep the people whom they do manage to hire. It also means that a tremendous amount of effort is being expended on

merely surviving the environment and preventing burnout instead of on productive activities.

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It appears, therefore, that while frogs have the sense to get out of the hot water, people do not. Now, most people are smarter than frogs. What's going on?

For one, frogs do not show off how well they can handle being boiled alive. At high-tech companies, however, what frequently happens is that dealing with an unreasonable situation is seen as a sign of toughness or dedication to the



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company. Over time, a culture develops which celebrates and perpetuates that purported toughness. In jujitsu, I hear all the time from people who tell me that they had to give up falling because they just couldn't tough it out anymore. In fact, it almost invariably turns out that they never learned to fall correctly in the first place and that's why it now hurts too much to continue. Assuming that they just had to "tough it out" prevented them from recognizing and fixing mistakes early, before they were ingrained as bad habits.

Now it's certainly true that overcoming a difficult or stressful situation feels good: it

increases feelings of competence and self-efficacy. There is, however, a difference between overcoming and enduring. Mountain climbers overcome challenges, they don't merely endure them. Enduring is fine, so long as it moves you toward a goal. Unfortunately, what far too many people choose to endure is, in fact, not moving toward anything except burnout and failure.

Another issue is that people respond to a situation by checking to see how others are responding: if it looks as though others are tolerating the situation, the instinctive response is to attempt to tolerate it as well. Thus, each person assumes that he or she is the only one uncomfortable, while, in reality, no one is happy. Ironically the harder team members work to avoid letting down the rest of the team, the more the team lets down its members and the company.

Of course, in true frog-boiling tradition, if the situation gradually worsens, we often don't realize just how bad it is getting. It's not until the

environment undergoes a major change or we take a vacation that we realize just how dysfunctional things are. Like sitting in an awkward position, it's often not obvious how sore you are until you move.

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So how can you recognize that you're being boiled alive?

- One of the best methods is to solicit the opinions of trusted outsiders. Bring in someone you can trust to be frank with you and ask for feedback. If the person thinks the work environment is unacceptable, bring in one or two more people. If all of you agree, odds

are that you need to make some changes.

- Look at your hiring results: if you are unable to recruit and retain top talent, don't assume there's something wrong with them; try to see the company from their perspective. If you can't do that, you're in hot water.
- How are your employees behaving? Are they happy, enthusiastic, motivated by enjoyment of their jobs? Or are they tired, irritable, always trudging through the day, motivated by fear of being fired? If it's the latter, or if you can't tell the difference, that's a bad sign.

The price you pay for living in boiling water is wasted energy and reduced productivity. Especially today, few businesses can afford that.

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