Feeling Stuck? Getting Past Impasse
Q&A with Timothy Butler
By Martha Lagace

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Most people at one time or another feel as if they are just spinning their wheels, unable to
gain traction either in career or in life. This feeling of being stuck in one place, while
troubling, is part of a necessary crisis leading to personal growth, says Dr. Timothy Butler,
Senior Fellow and Director of Career Development Programs at Harvard Business School.
"Without it we cannot grow, change, and—eventually—live more fully in a larger world,"
Butler writes in his new book, Getting Unstuck: How Dead Ends Become New Paths

Butler, a psychologist, psychotherapist, and career development counselor for over 25 years,
is also a researcher on career decision making generally and the relationship between
personality structure and work satisfaction in particular. He met recently with HBS Working
Knowledge to discuss how commonly business professionals may be confronted with a sense
of psychological impasse and how they can free themselves.

Martha Lagace: What sorts of thoughts, feelings, and images do people experience when
they face an impasse?
Timothy Butler: First, let's distinguish between day-to-day frustrations and the experience of
being at an impasse. The impasse experience has features that are common to all of us, and in
time each of us has a unique experience of impasse. For most people the recognition that
we're at an impasse, whether it's a career situation or a broader life situation, creeps up rather
than presents itself suddenly. For most people it comes through feelings first: of being
frustrated, stuck, maybe even feeling a significant down mood, maybe even shading toward
feeling depressed. And along with that, typically, is a self-attribution: feeling that there is
something wrong with us and feeling stuck.

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Thoughts are always part and parcel of the feeling experience: thoughts of "I'm not doing
something correctly, I'm not succeeding, I'm not fulfilling my potential. I'm not doing my job
to my utmost. I can't see what the next challenge is going to be and I can't get motivated about
it."
Q: Are there particular experiences that lead to an impasse?
A: No. Our lives are unique. We all experience impasse, and we will experience impasse many times in our lives. Why? One of the things I describe in the book is the fact that impasse is developmentally necessary. The meaning of an impasse, although it's usually first expressed as a failure or in an internalized notion of inadequacy, is a request for us to change our way of thinking about ourselves and our place in the world.

At impasse our model—our cognitive map of life and of the way we're going to fit into it—is no longer working. We all carry a representation of the world, our work, how we do our work, and how we fit in and where we're going; and that map is always inadequate in a number of ways. It always falls short of representing dynamic, ever-changing reality. Just continuing with our usual approaches to problem-solving will not help us break through.

Impasse means that we need to change our whole approach to the problem. We need to change our understanding of the problem. We have to change our repertoire of ways in which we approach life challenges.

As to what sorts of experiences lead to impasse, they could be anything: perhaps a sudden, unanticipated change at work—which happens all the time. The norm is change. There is much talk about change management, but the fact of the matter is, the "steady state" involves change as well. We may learn that someone—our boss, our boss's boss, or a key person—is leaving. He or she won't be here 4 weeks from now. The events that flow from a simple change such as this can be complex. Perhaps this event prompts a reorganization and suddenly we're feeling and thinking about our job in a whole different way.

Or maybe the trigger is an event in our personal life. The break-up of a relationship or the death of a parent. The types of experience that bring on impasse are myriad, and we often don't realize how much particular life events will mean to us. When loss or change brings us to impasse because we feel that we are at a dead end, we have to look at life anew because our old ways aren't working. If we continue to try to use the old ways it will just mean more pain.

Q: Do you think business people in particular find the experience of impasse especially challenging, given their career pressures?
A: Impasse is a familiar experience for them. Business professionals, particularly if they are working in dynamic markets, will be, perhaps at a rate more frequent than most people, exposed to situations where their jobs are redefined. What is being asked of them changes in very significant ways in a relatively short time. I think that every business professional and executive has a model of "what's next." If you asked most executives what's going to happen over the next 12 or even 18 months, what they will be doing, what their major responsibilities will be, they would have the answer in their back pocket: "This is what I need to accomplish, this is where I'll be, I expect things to go in this direction, and these are the goals I'm driving toward."

Well, that certainty can change radically on fairly short notice. When it does, the first response is to just muscle through. Keep on pushing and throw more resources at it. But often
what a clear impasse signifies is that you need to stop and realize that your model does not capture the reality of your business right now and the reality of your position within your organization.

Q: What are the steps to recognizing and overcoming impasse?
A: In my book I write about 6 phases in the impasse process. The process is not meant to be rigidly linear because obviously there's back and forth between any 2 of these phases or even between more than 2 of them at a time. But generally there's a movement and a pattern that the impasse follows, and it's helpful sometimes to break things down.

The first phase is the arrival of a crisis. Each person's first response is to keep on plugging.

Each impasse is an opportunity to look a little deeper and understand better what works for us.

Phase 2 is a deepening of the crisis. We realize that our old ways are not working. It's not a matter of staying up late, working harder, and getting in earlier. Emotionally there's the feeling of being stuck. And then some predictable things happen in the second phase: There is the return of old issues. We hit an impasse and suddenly old doubts emerge. "You never really were top at that and now it's really showing up." If it's a personal situation it may be old feelings of anger, shame, self-doubt. It's not just a career skills aspect; when I talk about the return of old issues, I mean issues that relate to any aspect of our lives. It's as if the impasse were made to break down our defenses. In particular, the inner critic becomes louder and more powerful during this second phase. The inner critic is that internal naysayer that Freud called the superego; but it wasn't a new concept, it's been around as long as humanity has. In Getting Unstuck I discuss some strategies for dealing with the inner critic.

The third phase is when we finally realize that our old model isn't working. We begin to face the situation with new eyes and new ears, ask what is happening, and attend to our direct, raw experience.

In the fourth phase we begin to listen better and to be open to a new type of information. We are pushed to the edge of our concrete, more purely analytic ways of understanding, and we begin to appreciate complexity and metaphor in underlying themes. We are forced to go deeper.

In Getting Unstuck I have a number of exercises that are designed to enable the reader to shift to this more metaphorical way of apprehending life. One exercise is called the 100 Jobs exercise. It has nothing to do with jobs. It's a way of helping a person identify the core themes, dynamic tensions, and images that are trying to emerge at this particular moment in his or her life. Another exercise called Image Gathering is a guided exercise by me on the Web site associated with the book.

The fifth phase of the impasse process is a deepening of insight into the patterns of the self. This phase is not discreet; it happens over time. There are patterns to the self: patterns to the things we like about the world, the things we value, the types of people we tend to enjoy, the
types we tend not to enjoy, the types of activities that tend to be more meaningful, the types of environments that are more pleasant and rewarding. As we grow older we have the possibility of gaining insight into our own patterns. Each impasse is an opportunity to look a little deeper and understand better what works for us. The more we know ourselves, the less we are thrown by the next impasse.

In the book there are a few chapters devoted to models of patterns of the self. I write about deeply embedded life interests and understanding how they get expressed in work, and how we learn which interests are most meaningful for us and what business or organizational roles will allow us to express them. I write about social motivators, power, achievement, and affiliation, borrowing on the work of Henry Murray and David McClelland.

The sixth and final phase requires taking action. The impasse developmental experience does not become realized until we actually do something to seal the deal, if you will. We buy those art supplies and set up the art studio in our home. Or we schedule that meeting that we’ve been thinking about for 2 years but have never done. We do something that shows the world and ourselves that we’ve gone through the impasse, it’s been a real experience, and now we can act in the world based on what we’ve learned.

**Q: Of these 6 steps, which are particularly difficult to deal with?**

**A:** Each stage has its predictable challenges, but some people find one stage more difficult than another. The arrival of the crisis for some people leads to panic. For many people, phase 2 is the toughest: this return of the old issues and the inner critic. "I thought I’d worked through this problem; why do I still feel so angry at this person, so inadequate around this issue?" For some, phase 3 is most difficult, admitting, "I don't know, I've got to start from square one." Some people just "get" phase 4, perhaps because it calls for a more intuitive and imaginative way of addressing a problem, but those who are less intuitive have to work harder. For phase 5, some people are more psychologically minded than others and when asked "Tell me about yourself" can express a rich text where others struggle. In phase 6 some people find that actually taking action is what stops them. They can do all the analysis and introspection, but when it comes time to stop and "do it"—ask for the promotion, buy the house or not—that is terribly difficult.

**Q: What awaits us on the other side of an impasse?**

**A:** The unknown. That's the difficulty of impasse: You don't know. The whole basis of an impasse is that you thought you knew what was going to happen next, but you didn't. What awaits us is how our life is going to open up next. It's pretty scary and also pretty exciting. The big message from an impasse is that you don't know what awaits you. But not knowing is not the bad thing that you think it is.