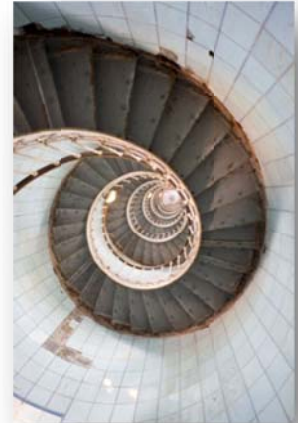




What is an Upward Spiral?

“Yours is the voice that can help ignite the contagious upward spiral of confidence that our country desperately needs.”

*– Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks
Letter to America, Sept 2011*



In September, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz called business leaders and fellow citizens to help turn the tide of uncertainty that has such a grip on our country. “We must be catalysts for change... waiting for Washington to act is not a plan of action,” he says. Next week, he will be honored as the Fortune Business Person of the Year for 2011.

Why is the CEO of a major public corporation asking everyday citizens to help shift the country’s cultural climate? And what does he mean by an “upward spiral”?

In a way, we know what Schultz means by an upward spiral. It is the antidote to a downward spiral: a way to reverse the destructive cycles that drag groups down to their lowest level.

Any leader with a vision knows exactly what I mean. How do you get your team to care? Your banker to take a risk? Your customers and partners to trust that you will deliver?

Knowing how to reverse downward spirals and mobilize upward spirals can revolutionize how you lead, in business and in life.

The Upward Spiral as a Metaphor for Growth

If a downward spiral is a metaphor for deterioration, an upward spiral is a metaphor for growth.

Many things in nature grow in spirals, from ferns to seashells to whirlpools. They can be as small the double-helix of a protein molecule, and as large as the spiral arms of the Milky Way. No wonder the spiral is universally recognized as a symbol for growth.



We can define an upward spiral as any self-reinforcing process that creates a valuable resource as it grows. Though Schultz focuses on confidence, that resource could also be trust, accountability, knowledge, or any asset that helps a business or community thrive. According to [Rosabeth Moss Kanter](#), investing in the resources and infrastructure a team needs is the secret sauce of a successful turnaround.

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For example, Sheriff Matt Bostrom of Ramsey County, MN, describes how he creates an [Upward Spiral of Trust](#) with his team. “It begins with me,” he says. “If my staff knows I trust them... their confidence in their ability to do [their] job and know they have that support from their supervisors allows them to go out and do great things.”ⁱ

The Power of Positive Influence

The central truth that makes an upward spiral possible is that human beings are not fixed entities.

Recent research in social psychology and neuroscience proves what Steve Jobs knew long ago: we have enormous hidden potential, but it has to be activated. According to Ryan and Robert Quinn, authors of [Lift](#), we can learn to activate this potential in ourselves. Even intelligence is not fixed: picture yourself as a college professor and your score in Trivial Pursuit can go up by 30%.ⁱⁱ

But sometimes we need help. For five years, John McCain maintained his courage and honor as a POW in Vietnam. It wasn't willpower, he says. It was hearing the quiet taps on the wall from fellow prisoners each time he was taken to be questioned.

When teams do this for each other, according to authors [Cameron, Dutton and Quinn](#), they generate more ideas, create new knowledge and increase their performance as individuals and as a team.

The secret is positive influence: the ability to activate another person's potential. In this video, I give a brief recap of the downward spiral and how positive influence helps to reverse it.



But What about “Them”?

Before we invest our energy in another person, we need to believe that hidden potential is there.

Sometimes this is not so clear.

For example, a colleague and I recently met with the CEO of a small business that had hit a plateau. (I'll call him Hari.)

Despite a stream of product innovations, they were losing customers faster than they could replace them. But Hari could not get his team to care about service. “They just aren't the caliber of professional I need,” he concluded. “Unfortunately, I can't afford to replace them all at once.”

When systems are stuck, we naturally retreat into our corners. Executives close their doors. Teams eat at separate tables. Congresspeople stop playing poker with those from the other side of the aisle.

At times like these, it takes radical imagination to picture anything changing.

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Seeing The Potential for Change

Imagine for a moment you are in Nashville.

It is 1960. For three months, you have been sitting at lunch counters at which you are not welcome. You have been humiliated, threatened, beaten or arrested. Today, 4000 of you have gathered in the courthouse square. Mayor Ben West comes out to talk; but how do you speak to someone so false that they campaign with black voters, then do nothing to end segregation?



Eventually, 22-year-old Diane Nash steps to the front of the group.

“Do you believe segregation is wrong?” she asks the mayor. He agrees that it is.

“Will you use your prestige as mayor to ask for an end to segregation?” she continues. He asks all citizens present not to engage in segregation.

“Does that include the lunch counters?” she persists. Cornered, he reluctantly answers, yes.

“Wait a minute,” calls out another protester. “Are you really asking for an end to the segregation of eating facilities?” There is silence in the square.

Then Mayor Ben West replies with force. “Right, that’s absolutely right.” Suddenly, he and the black leaders are embracing each other. And with that, desegregation has begun in Nashville.



Up until the moment it happened, few saw the potential for this breakthrough. **Yet with just three questions, Diane Nash helped the mayor make a decision he was proud to have made.** Though enormous fortitude and courage were required to get to that moment, and though the work to achieve equality continues, her actions in that moment enabled a very important step.

Could Hari achieve a similar breakthrough?

When my colleague and I met with Hari’s team, we discovered the answer was yes.

His staff was energetic, intelligent and committed to great service -- but they were discouraged. They needed certain documentation to be able to answer customer questions, but their requests had gone

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unanswered. Hari didn't need to convince them to care! He needed to provide the documentation they asked for, then hold them accountable for using it to deliver better service.

The Right Combination of Yes's and No's

As you can see, positive influence is not about "being positive" in the usual sense. Often, it includes saying no.



"We are better than this," said Howard Schultz in his letter. He went on to ask business leaders to join him in creating jobs, and invested \$5 million to launch Create Jobs USA. Despite the SuperCommittee's stalemate, his efforts and the commentary around them have shown there is significant voter interest in a more mature Congress.

Schultz' pledges and jobs campaigns are not complete solutions. We still need to get to the root causes of electioneering and stalemate in Congress. And, as [the Occupy movement](#) is pointing out with their "no's", we do need a national point of view on jobs.

But by outlining both a no and a yes, Schultz took a first step toward reversing the downward spiral and mobilizing an upward one.ⁱⁱⁱ

What is the right combination of yes's and no's for your situation?

What is your version of "not waiting for Washington to act?" Is your team waiting for something and you just don't know it? Does the leader need something from you before they can take the next step?

[According to David Brooks](#), citizen distrust increases politicians' need to take extreme positions. What can we do as citizens, leaders and team members to convey our willingness to take a more rational approach?

Clearly, there is more learn about upward spirals and what helps them take off.

- **How do you apply positive influence with your team? Customers, partners and peers?**
- **When do you say no and how?**
- **How do you know your actions are having an impact?**
- **How do you activate your own highest potential?**

These are important questions as you lead your team and your organization.

But we need to go further. Business is being called by both the left and the right to participate more actively and responsibly in civil society.

- **What is the role of business leaders in influencing democracy for the better?**

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- **How do we reduce our part in the downward spiral of polarization and deteriorating hope?**

Over the next few weeks and months, we will be exploring these questions in depth, and outlining the simple rules, practices and tactics you can use to mobilize an upward spiral in any relationship.

I hope you will join us.

Elizabeth Doty

November 30, 2011



To view this post online, please go to:

<http://worklore.com/Organizational-Learning-Change/what-is-an-upward-spiral.html>

Notes

ⁱ Multiple reports show Sheriff Bostrom's approach is working and has widespread support in the county, though he has been sued by two former employees.

<http://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2011/08/25/federal-lawsuit-filed-against-ramsey-co-sheriff/>

ⁱⁱ Malcom Gladwell, Blink

ⁱⁱⁱ As William Schlitz has pointed out, Schultz' pledge is a partial step, because it [does not include contributions to PAC's](#). While it is tempting to conclude that Schultz' effort is a P.R. ploy, this misses a critical opportunity. In a downward spiral, the best almost anyone can do is make an incremental step. If we discount every incremental step as insincere, we never get traction -- though if we accept them as sufficient, we never get to the full solution. **The key is to build on others' efforts, then call them to go further.**

Clearly, we cannot rely solely on Schultz' pledges or initiatives. The electioneering he describes is best stopped through campaign finance reform. Secondly, we need a national strategy that includes the kinds of jobs we want to attract. But we would all do well to try to be as clear and committed as Schultz has been thus far, including considering our own contributions to the problem.

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