

Moving into Unfamiliar Territory

We move into new territory all the time – we are always stretching, growing, learning how to do new things, expanding our concept of ourselves. Even though we know stepping into new ways of being can be the best thing for us, that doesn't mean that it is easy to do. When any kind of new behavior is a real stretch for us, we can look at it as if we are crossing an edge or climbing over a steep mountain peak to move from where we are now to where we know we need to be. It can help us on the journey into unfamiliar territory to know a few things about crossing edges.

Crossing edges – whether of our own choosing or someone else's – can be scary and challenging. Some new territory is not that big of a change from what we know, and in those cases the edges may not be so terrifying. But often the changes we need or want to make can be quite daunting. It is a normal part of our constantly changing lives to face edges with varying levels of desire all the way to wanting to do anything we can to avoid them.

Our primary identity is who we think we are. And that is only one part of us. Every time we expand beyond who we think we are into something new, this new behavior (or idea or perspective or skill) is what we would call our secondary identity. As long as we are growing we will continue to move into new “secondary” identities. For example, I'm quite comfortable working with people in all kinds of situations. Emotions are my forte. So my primary identity is “people person”. I am not a “computer person”. Any new skill involving my computer is a huge stretch or edge for me. Skilled computer operator is a distant secondary for me.

There are all kinds of edges we face. Some examples might be:

- Getting a promotion that requires employee supervision for someone that has never supervised others
- Having to talk to a colleague about a sensitive subject
- Taking on a new perspective or idea
- Learning a new skill especially one that is quite foreign to us
- Adapting to new management or policy changes that are different from “the way we've always done things around here”

Edges are those spaces between what we think we are capable of doing (who we are) and what new capability we are moving into (who we are not).

How can we recognize edges? Due to the challenging nature of edges, we often dance around them for a while. Some “edge behaviors” are:

- Changing the subject
- Feeling lost, blank or confused
- Giggling, fidgeting, changing tone or volume of voice
- Change in posture or facial expressions
- Incomplete sentences or unfinished phrases
- Loss of energy or getting distracted

If you pick up on any of the avoidance of the edge behaviors they can alert you to your proximity to the mountain peak.

Once aware and conscious of the edge, we can have more choice in crossing it. What can help us over edges? It might be to have someone champion us over the edge. This can be any ally who reminds us of what we want on the other side and perhaps reminds us of our strengths that we can use to make it over. Maybe if they've already crossed this edge or another challenging one they can share their tricks of the crossing with us. These ease us over our edges.

Sometimes we need to get kicked over the edge by someone calling us forth or challenging us. And we can do this for ourselves as well.

Our perspectives in approaching edges can make all the difference, too. If we come from compassion, lightness, understanding, normalizing, and curiosity edges can be less daunting. What perspective or stance would make crossing edges easier for you or your team?

Sometimes we lose it when trekking over edges. If we get forced into way unfamiliar territory too quickly we may get what we call "triggered", meaning we leave our primary adult, well functioning self on the other side of the mountain and end up in the new place with a part of ourselves who is not so socially adept. For example, if my computer goes berserk while I'm desperately trying to meet a time line, I can easily end up ranting, raving and crying. It is totally foreign territory for me to be a techie. And if I am forced to go there under pressure my very unskilled triggered self shows up and takes over. In a case like this I get slammed over the edge and it's not a pretty sight.

In coaching we can learn how to access the power and wisdom of our triggered selves while still having our adult self run our show, so for now it's helpful just to understand what can happen when pushed over edges.

If we get forced over huge edges or over edges for long periods of time we can occasionally not be able to cope with what's happening at all and we go into an internal collapse or "realm". Realms are like inner lands where communication or input is not available any longer. If my computer completely crashes and I lose all my data and miss my project deadlines and can't understand a thing tech support is telling me, I could go from beyond my triggered self to "What's the use, I'll never succeed no matter what I do" or "Computers are the ultimate evil so they can never be trusted and I should just give up now" or some other version of utter despair, gloom, doom and "it will never be any better". This absolute hopeless way of thinking is a realm.

Realms are actually self-protective. When we are completely overwhelmed and can't take in anything more, realms make that happen – nothing else is coming in at this time. When we are too edged-out our psyche creates a bubble for us to be in until we have recuperated. Realms are self-releasing – sooner or later we will climb out of our hole.

They may be uncomfortable but they are familiar and protective and they will eventually release us when we've caught our breath.

It's not the time for coaching when someone is in a realm. When in a realm we resist efforts to get us out. Remember, the information feed has been cut, so if you or someone else is in a realm take some space and wait until the realm has cleared.

What else can we do about realms? First, normalize them. Sometimes we all get edged-out and either get triggered or sent into a realm. It happens. If we are aware of it we can recognize when we are moving in that direction and perhaps make adjustments before the collapse. Or, if we do go into a realm, some part of us will now know what's going on and won't be in the realm. Awareness is the key to working with realms. Groups have realms, too. When multiple members of a team get edged-out they can pull the whole team into a realm – a place where no one can imagine it ever getting any better so why bother. Have you ever fell into a black hole like this with a group?

Sometimes in crossing edges we get tripped up with mixed signals. That's because we're dancing back and forth over the edge. For example, if my primary self is nice, kind and agreeable, it can be a huge edge for me to refuse a request of a colleague. My secondary – on the other side of the edge – is clear, direct, assertive and honest. Because that's such a big edge for me I could reply to a request clearly stating that I am unable to agree to it and then, at the end of the conversation, add, "but if you can't find anyone else, let me know". I'm giving a mixed signal because it was just too hard to stay over that edge for an entire conversation.

One big edge that many of us face revolves around the difficult conversations that we need to have with people. When we need to tell someone something that we imagine will hurt them or us and we don't know how to do it, that can be a Mount Everest type of edge.

Some questions to consider regarding the unfamiliar territory of difficult conversations:

Who are you usually (primary) in conversations with your colleagues?

Who are you not (secondary)?

What's edgy for you about difficult coaching conversations?

What are some of your favorite edge avoiding behaviors?

Say you get pushed over an edge regarding difficult conversations. How would you describe your triggered self? (You can keep this one to yourself – just be aware of it.)

What would help you over the edge into being able to engage in crucial conversations?

Are there any mixed signals regarding crucial conversations in your organization/team/family?

What are some edges you have crossed that you are really proud of? How did you cross them? What could you remember about who you were in the process of crossing those edges that could help you now?

Is there someone you could partner with to help each other climb over each of your big edges?

Is this entire conversation an edge for you?

Summary of edges:

They involve moving from “who we are” into “who we are not”

As long as we are growing we will encounter edges

We often avoid them and can recognize edge behaviors

Our perspective in approaching them can make a big difference

We can ease over them, jump over them, be called over them, or be slammed over them

If slammed over an edge we could lose our bearings and show up as a less-than-skilled triggered self

If slammed way over them we could retreat into our own world or realm

We could dance back and forth over them and give mixed signals

All of the above is completely normal and understandable

Awareness is key

Unfamiliar Territory – Avoiding Toxic Communication

What can make difficult communication so edgy is the expectation of it being hurtful to us and the other person. One way past this edge around difficult conversations is to avoid the four very hurtful or toxic communication styles. According to John Gottman, author of The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work, these are so deadly to relationships he calls them the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. They are:

1. Blaming or criticism – verbally attacking the person rather than their behavior
2. Defensiveness – not owning your own behavior or contribution to the problem
3. Stonewalling – refusing to engage, withdrawal, not communicating, silent treatment
4. Contempt – hostile humor, belittling, cynicism, sarcasm, name calling

We all use one or more of these in our communications at one time or another. Part of conscious and intentional relationships is to be able to recognize them and to learn other ways of interacting with each other.

Some antidotes for each of the Four Horsemen

Blaming and criticism:

Be direct about the behavior you don't like, do not attack the person.

Use “I” statements rather than “You” statements. A good formula is

I feel _____

About this behavior _____

And I want you to _____

This means you find the request behind your complaint.

It is also helpful to begin with a “soft start up” which means to set the tone and timing for the conversation and ease into it.

Defensiveness:

Look for the 2% truth in what the person is saying and own it. Be open to influence. Assume innocence. Actively listen and be curious about what the person is saying.

Stonewalling:

Check to see if you are emotionally overwhelmed and maybe just need some time to gain composure and then be willing to reengage. Check to see if you are edged-out, maybe in a realm and again, take some time to pop out of it. Address what you fear about being in the conversation. Recognize the edge and seek ways to cross it. Be open to being influenced by the other. Use the “I feel and I want” formula above to ask for what you need.

Contempt:

Recognize that all forms of contempt are disrespectful and damaging to the relationship, even if they seem trivial (like eye rolling or name calling). Use the “I feel and I want” formula above to ask for what you need. Subtle forms of contempt include hostile gossiping and going around the chain of command.

These four toxins often run in packs – they call each other forth. So when I feel blamed I get defensive or if I run into contempt repeatedly I may just stonewall.

We learned these without knowing any better from all the other people who just didn't know any better and each one of them can have a protective function for us. But that protection is very short lived. It is not sustainable for relationships to have these horsemen running about. And it is not conducive to addressing difficult conversations to have these toxic behaviors present. We have to own our emotions and express them in ways that don't just call up horsemen from someone else.

And finally, a couple of important tips for successful communication and vibrant relationships:

Relationships need a 5 to 1 ratio of positive to negative interactions to be successful.

The bricks in the walls between people are made of judgment while the bricks in the bridges between people are made of curiosity.

So suspend judgment and be curious, really curious about what's going on with the other person. Find all the ways you can to have genuinely positive interactions with each other.

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