

## Equilibrium



A road to zero, trafficked by fearful people.

“One day when [I was] a child, I stood beneath a swing frame that towered above me. Another child, older than me, told me of the time a girl had swung and swung until, finally, she looped over the top. I listened in silent awe. She had done what we only dreamed of doing, swung so uncontrollably high that finally not even gravity could hold her.

I think of this apocryphal story as I sit now in a small playground, watching my youngest son run from one activity to another. He has climbed, swung, and jumped, whirled around on a spinning platform, and wobbled along a rolling log until, laughing, he loses his balance. Now he is perched on a teeter-totter, waiting to be bumped high in the



air when his partner crashes to the ground. Everywhere I look, there are bodies in motion, energies in search of adventure.

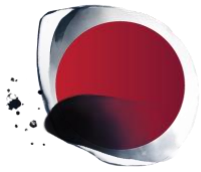
It seems that the very experiences these children seek out are ones we avoid: disequilibrium, novelty, loss of control, surprise. These make for a good playground, but for a dangerous life. We avoid these things so much that if an organization were to take the form of a teeter-totter, we'd brace it up at both ends, turning it into a straight plank. But why has equilibrium become such a prized part of adult life? **Why are we afraid of what happens if our boat gets rocked?** Is it that we prefer balance to change? Does equilibrium feel more secure?

Sometimes, to clear up a confusing concept, it helps me to return to the accepted definition of the word. So I open the American Heritage Dictionary to learn about equilibrium: "Equilibrium. 1. A condition in which all acting influences are canceled by others resulting in a stable, balanced, or unchanging system. 2. Physics. The condition of a system in which the resultant of all acting forces is zero. . . . 4. Mental or emotional balance. . . . poise."

I am surprised by the negativity of the first two definitions. A condition in which the result of all activity is zero? Why, then, do we desire equilibrium so much, or use the same word to describe mental and emotional well-being? In my own life, I don't experience equilibrium as an always desirable state. And I don't believe it is a desirable state for an organization. Quite the contrary. I've observed the search for organizational equilibrium as a sure path to institutional death, **a road to zero trafficked by fearful people**. Having noticed the negative effects of equilibrium so often, I've been puzzled why it has earned such high status." (Wheatley, 1994, pp. 75-76)

## Reference

Wheatley, Margaret J. (1994). *Leadership and the new science: Learning about organization from an orderly universe*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.



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