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## COLUMNIST

### How To Maximize Achievement And Minimize Burnout: Know Your 3 Zones

Finding that optimum amount of challenge is critical for high achieving leaders in fast-paced companies, but it's not always easy.



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IMAGE: Getty Images

Gut check: Are you feeling challenged at work?

Are you challenged enough?

Are you too challenged?

To be your best--hitting your targets, meeting your goals, advancing your career--it's important to get the answer to those questions right. And there is a "right" answer. You need the optimum amount of challenge to stretch yourself (without overdoing it). Too little challenge, and you're underperforming. Too much, and you're at risk of burning out.

Finding that optimum amount of challenge is critical for high achieving leaders in fast-paced companies, but it's not always easy.

- Sometimes leaders and high achievers race so fast after the next level goal that they forget to enjoy the space they are in right now.
- Sometimes the pace is so fast they feel they can't slow down.
- And sometimes there's a mismatch between individuals and their managers about how much stretch is enough. Recently I had an interesting conversation with a manager who was highly motivated about advancing one of his employees. He wanted her to get out of her comfort zone, to stretch and challenge herself, to be bold and take risks. He wanted to see her career take off by gaining experience with diverse challenges. But when I talked to the employee herself, she seemed exhausted. She said, "Sometimes I wish I could just relax and settle into my job."

To assess your own amount of challenge, consider three options:

The "Comfort Zone"

The "Stretch Zone"

The "Panic Zone."

**The Comfort Zone.** Your comfort zone is the place where you feel most comfortable. Here things are easy. You know what you are doing, and you have done it before. You feel a sense of peace, security and confidence. There is no question that in your comfort zone you feel good most of the time. However, the comfort zone is not the ideal place to live long term.

The risks of complacency live in the Comfort Zone. Here you can neglect to challenge yourself, which causes stagnation and can eventually stop growth and progress. If you've been in the Comfort Zone too long, you may start to feel a little anxious--a sign it's time for you to get out and do something more.

When you have been in your comfort zone long enough to build up your confidence and feel like you know what you are doing, that is the time to step it up and move up into your stretch zone. Remember, leaders must constantly work to challenge themselves, acquire new skills, meet new

people and say "yes" to new experiences in order to grow.

Remember the example of the employee above whose boss was excited to challenge her? In her exhaustion, she was craving a little time in the comfort zone. She felt she needed time to reflect, readjust, and become comfortable and confident before taking on the next challenge. The Comfort Zone isn't a bad place to be. Just be sure you don't stay there too long.

**Stretch Zone.** Your Stretch Zone is your sweet spot. This is the place to stay as much as you possibly can. In the stretch zone, you set goals that are just out of reach: realistic and reasonable, but challenging. You say "yes" to new opportunities. It is that place where your mental productivity and performance reach their peak. You look for ways to expand your knowledge, your skills and your expertise. You try to improve yourself in significant ways that have an impact on you, your goals and the people around you. In your stretch zone, you are constantly raising your hand, getting in there, trying new things and constantly moving onward and upward to something better and better. The great thing about the stretch zone is that it is energizing, and uplifting, gratifying, fulfilling and accomplishing - all the ingredients that define excellent performance.

For the manager that wanted to stretch his employee, the Stretch Zone would be the best place for both of them to be.

It is possible, however, to take it too far, and that is when you move into the Panic Zone.

**Panic Zone.** The Panic Zone is where stretching becomes stretched, where risk-taking becomes too risky, where being bold becomes too much. In your Panic Zone you are so far out of your comfort zone that you no longer feel there is a floor beneath you.

The dangers of the panic zone are multiple. You can get distracted. You can move too fast. You can make mistakes. Ultimately you can burn out.

It is in the panic zone I meet too many talented people who are squandering their precious resources-- their talents, their contributions, themselves. They are stretched so thin that they are no longer effective.

You can see how this might be the next step (or the last straw) for our overly challenged employee. Stretched too far for too long with no end in sight, she was becoming anxious and less effective than she could be.

As a visual reminder of the three zones, think of a rubber band. A rubber band lying on the table, not doing its job, is very useless, full of potential, but unrealized potential, just waiting to be used. A rubber band that is stretched to an optimum level has a job to do, to hold things together. A rubber band that is stretched too far will start to fray, and will eventually snap. When you're in the panic zone for too long, you can feel yourself ready to snap too.

When it comes to the three zones above, ask yourself:

- Which zone are you in?
- Where do you want to be?
- What would it take to get there?
- What decisions do you need to take, and what conversations do you need to have?
- Can you define the perfect stretch zone for you?
- Where do you want things to ease up, to keep you out of the panic zone?
- Where can you step things up to move into the stretch?

These are all questions you can ask yourself to get to the perfect level of energy where you are focused, clear and gaining momentum with excitement and energy for the long term.

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