

Why Great Leaders Should Sometimes Make Things Harder for Their Teams, According To 2 Stanford Professors

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In their new book, Robert I. Sutton and Huggy Rao dive into the drawbacks—and benefits—of friction.

Our seven-year project taught us that a bedrock belief of friction fixers is that if we focus on what to make easier and faster and what to make harder and slower, life will be better for workers and the people they serve. And if we turn our attention to finding when and where friction troubles arise, understanding the causes, and developing remedies, then our organization will be more humane, productive, innovative, and profitable. That's what Dr. Melinda Ashton's team did when they invited their colleagues to stop and think about stupid stuff that was clogging up Hawaii Pacific's health records system. And what Michael Brennan's team at Civilla did during Project Re:form, when they involved numerous government leaders, civil servants, and citizens as they revamped Michigan's benefits application form. The power of pausing to think about removing needless complexity is seen in research by Gabrielle Adams of the University of Virginia and her colleagues in the prestigious publication *Nature*. They document the human penchant to add rather than subtract—and show how to overcome that baked-in bias. In a series of 20 studies, these researchers found that—in tasks ranging from

building LEGO models to improving a university—peoples' default problem-solving mode is to add rather than subtract complexity. Even when people were asked to build LEGO models where the best solution was to remove pieces at a key juncture (and were charged 10 cents for each LEGO brick used), they still added more pieces. But when the researchers added a cognitive speed bump—and reminded people that they could either add or subtract pieces from the LEGO model—they were far more likely to remove pieces at the key juncture.

Sounds obvious, doesn't it? It is. Friction fixers pride themselves in being masters of the obvious. They are mighty skeptical of secret solutions, shocking surprises, and miracle cures.

This bedrock belief, this dogged dedication to making the right things easier and wrong things harder, is sharpened by three convictions that emerged from our project and run through this book. These beliefs help friction fixers to avoid wallowing in vague platitudes, take concrete action instead, and inspire others to join their mission.

The first conviction is I am accountable for friction fixing, and so are you. Friction fixers feel obligated to prevent themselves and their colleagues from being oblivious of friction that they and their organizations generate. They battle decisions and designs that treat such obstacles and opportunities as orphan problems. They take responsibility for fixing things, encouraging others to join them, and discouraging free riders.

That's what Noam Bardin did when he pressed pause at Waze and made it everyone's job to figure out what was wrong with the company's app and how to repair it. As we wrote in *Scaling Up Excellence*, such accountability means everyone presses everyone else to talk and act as if "I own the place and the place owns me." Friction fixers see themselves as part of a movement that recruits, teaches, and rewards everyone around them—whether their zone of influence is modest or massive—to step up and figure out what is broken and how to mend it.

The second conviction is that we are trustees of how people spend their time. Fixers are preoccupied with how to design work and organizations, and how to treat others, to make the best use of employees', customers', and citizens' time. It paves the way for two other key elements of friction fixing—figuring out what ought to be hard and what ought to be easy—which is essential for determining where people ought to spend more time and less time, and where to inject more and less friction. There are a number of ways that Friction Fixers can do this work including what we call the "help pyramid," which ranges from helping people to cope with friction troubles that they can't remove (at least for now) to implementing local and system wide changes for the better. Our pyramid helps you decide when redesigning or repairing a broken system is a good use of time. Or when doing so is futile and it's better to help people keep their dignity intact, to avoid blaming themselves, and to stave off despair and helplessness. And to spend their time finding the least bad paths for traveling through lousy systems rather than squandering time tilting at windmills.

The third conviction is that friction fixing is a craft that we learn, practice, develop, teach, and spread to others. Friction fixers know that their work entails finding, mastering, and applying specific skills and tools, having successes and setbacks that help them refine their craft, and learning from and teaching fellow travelers. That there are no one-size-fits all solutions for the

minor hassles and massive messes that they tackle. Fixers develop custom projects that are suited to them, their team, and their organization.

To help you develop this craft, The Friction Project dissects five prevalent and destructive traps: Oblivious Leaders, Addition Sickness, Broken Connections, Jargon Monoxide, and Fast and Frenzied. Understanding how each plagues organizations and learning the appropriate tactics, tools, rituals, and design principles to help you avoid, dampen, and remove each trap—will help people feel less frustrated, helpless, and defeated at work.

Too many of our teams and organizations are mired in muck because the wrong things are too easy and the right things are too hard. It doesn't need to be that way. The Friction Project fortifies you to band together with others to avoid, escape, and remove such obstacles to productivity, innovation, dignity, and sanity. To create a virtuous circle that is stoked by the feeling that, to earn others' respect and the right to be proud of myself, I've got to be part of the friction solution rather than part of the problem.