



You Want Me To Do What? – Risking to Win

by
Jim McCormick

In Brief

- Although settling into your comfort zone may be tempting, doing so will unnecessarily limit your achievement and success. Growing personally and professionally requires you to step out of your comfort zone and bolster your risk-taking skills.
- Because the world is changing at a rapid and accelerating pace, those who are unwilling or unable to take risks will become ineffective if not obsolete.
- Being nimble and quick to adapt is part of being effective as a risk-taker.
- It's important to let your judgment skills override a reflexive – and likely negative – response to fear of the unknown.

People who consistently perform at a higher level have certain things in common.

- They are committed to their success.
- They have a passion for their profession.
- They have clear goals.
- They are comfortable taking intelligent risks thoughtfully.

Their ability to take intelligent risks is an important element of their success. It is also a significant determinant in their level of accomplishment. Top performers are talented and persistent risk-takers.

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By contrast, sub-optimal performers often settle into their comfort zone, fall into recurring patterns and stop challenging themselves in significant ways. The good news is that you can improve your risk-taking ability and hence your performance.

I'm fairly knowledgeable about successful risk-taking. As a Professional Exhibition Skydiver, I've had to learn how to prepare both intellectually and emotionally to prevail in the face of some extraordinary risks. I'm among the few who has successfully made one of the most challenging stadium jumps in the United States into wind-buffed Candlestick Park on the shore of San Francisco Bay. By being willing to take some significant risks, I've been able to earn six skydiving World Records and be among the few to ever stand at the North Pole.

Skydiving is not the only setting where I've found effective risk-taking skills to be valuable. It has also been vitally important in my business career. I had to risk effectively when I was the Chief Operating Officer of an international architecture firm. The same was true when I was responsible for a portfolio of more than \$140 million worth of commercial real estate. If I had not been willing to take some significant risks, I'd still be someone else's employee instead of working for myself for over eighteen years.

The Lure of the Comfort Zone

The comfort zone is seductive. We all desire comfort. It's human nature. However, too much comfort does not serve us well. An inability to occasionally step out of your comfort zone – to challenge yourself, to leave the familiar – will ultimately limit your performance.

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Adaptability

Adaptability is vital and becoming more so. Change is pervasive and accelerating. Single-employer careers are nearly history and single-profession careers barely remain.

If you are going to thrive in a world of rapid change, you have to be adept at adapting. The more comfortable you are with taking risks and dealing with the resulting fear, the better you will be at adapting.

Change can be frightening. It confronts us with the unknown. It's common and normal to be fearful of change. Unfortunately, left unresolved, the fear response can profoundly limit your performance.

The Critical Step – Responding Effectively to Fear

*"Courage is resistance to fear,
mastery of fear,
not absence of fear."*

Mark Twain

Fear is powerful. It will significantly hamper your ability to risk effectively. Learning how to prevail in the face of fear is a critical step in improving your ability to take rewarding risks.

To become a more capable risk-taker, you need to move away from the instinctive response to fear and toward the counterintuitive response. The constructive – though often counterintuitive – response to fear is to acknowledge and accept it.

This approach has been validated by the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration. Early in the space program, NASA observed that some of its astronauts were completing their missions successfully without suffering motion and stress sickness. Another group was consistently having these problems. Based on empirical research, NASA determined there was only one factor that differentiated the two groups.

The astronauts who were completing their mission without these physical manifestations of fear had acknowledged in advance to themselves or others that they were going to be afraid. This research documents how profoundly a constructive response to fear impacts our performance.

The Rewards of Risk-Taking

Why take risks anyway? Why even consider leaving your comfort zone? Isn't risk-taking something we are supposed to leave behind when we become adults? Isn't it just a remnant of impertinent youthful behavior we should grow out of as we matured and hopefully grow wiser?

The partial answer to these questions has already been provided. Risk-taking yields vitality and a higher level of achievement. But there's more.

For every intelligent risk there is at least one potential reward. This is a Direct Reward – a reward that can be identified at the time the risk is being considered.

Better yet, a consistent pattern of intelligent risk-taking will yield something more: Compound Rewards! Compound Rewards are the surprise rewards - the rewards we cannot anticipate at the time we are considering a risk or initiative. These are the rewards you would never have enjoyed if were not willing to step out of your comfort zone. But you will enjoy them if you are willing to challenge yourself, leave your comfort zone and take some risks.

It occurred for me. When I was 10,000 feet over the North Pole and moments away from the 120 degree below zero temperature of freefall, I had no way of knowing what Compound Rewards that risk would bring. I had no way of knowing that jump would be the first step in an extraordinary career transition that would lead me to abandon a fairly conventional corporate career path and make my avocation of skydiving a major part of my vocation.

We don't know the rewards we will enjoy by our willingness to take intelligent risks, but we do know the rewards will not occur unless we are willing to take those risks. And wouldn't it be a shame to forgo some wonderful, if unknown, rewards just because we can't seem to find our way out of our comfort zone!

***“And the trouble is, if you don’t risk anything,
you risk even more.”***

Erica Jong
Author and Poet

Jim McCormick is the Founder and President of the Research Institute for Risk Intelligence. His books include *Business Lessons from the Edge* (McGraw-Hill), *The Power of Risk* (Maxwell Press) and *The First-Time Manager* (AMACOM). More information is available at www.JimMcCormick.com.

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