

The Parmenides Fallacy: Are You Downplaying The Cost Of Inaction?

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Have you ever been in a situation that wasn't going so well, but rather than do something to change it, you told yourself, "Ah, it's not so bad. Maybe if I just sit tight it will get better by itself. Maybe if I wait awhile, the problem will go away or I'll just stop being so bothered by it." Making a change, taking a chance, or speaking up just seemed too hard. Too risky. After all, if you rock the apple cart you might end up falling out of it. And so you stuck with the status quo but rather than getting better over time, things only got worse. Sound familiar?

While researching my new book *Stop Playing Safe*, I came upon numerous fascinating studies by neuro-scientists about how our brains work. Using the latest brain imaging technologies, researchers have been able to prove that we human beings are neurologically wired to over-estimate the size of risks, under-estimate our ability to handle them, and downplay the costs of inaction. This drives us to stick with the status quo – even one we dislike – and avoid taking the very actions that would actually set us on a path to greater personal happiness and professional success.

In other words, by choosing not to make a change or take a chance – whether in your career, business, or any other area of life – you can wind up incurring steep costs, in ways you can't possibly foresee from where you are right now.

Professor Philip Bobbit from the University of Texas has even given a name to the human tendency to assume the present situation will remain the same. He calls it the 'Parmenides Fallacy,' after the misguided Greek philosopher who argued that the world was static and that all change was an illusion.

Parmenides Fallacy serves as a reminder to not to kid ourselves; choosing to do nothing (about our job, business, career, relationship, fitness, weight...) will ultimately cost us in some way. As I wrote in *Stop Playing Safe*, "We like to think that things will just get better with time. But more often, the opposite is true: things that aren't working well now only get worse. Our jobs will become more draining, our careers less inspiring, our boss more frustrating." By not taking a risk in our job or career – whether making a change or proactively trying to adapt to those changes going on around us – we run the bigger risk of being left behind.

Of course taking actions we haven't taken before, moving outside our comfort zone, is often scary and rarely comfortable. However, it is always rewarding. When you make a decision to put yourself 'out there' – whether making a career change, engaging in a "*courageous conversation*" with a colleague or close friend, friend, asking for your boss's support to move into a more senior position,

volunteering to take on high profile role, or simply dusting off your CV to make a change in your career – things don’t always go to plan. But too often we focus on everything that might go wrong if we take a risk, and we fail to acknowledge what could go wrong or worsen if we don’t.

In an effort to take the safest path possible many people end up living a life they would never consciously have chosen. Sure, sometimes the path of least resistance, effort, and risk is the right one. But often it’s not. When weighing your options, ask yourself a question: is this choice driven more by what inspires me, or by what frightens me? Then be brutally honest about the cost of inaction. You may find that “playing it safe” is the greatest risk of all.