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Falling off a Hang Glider, on to Fool's Perch

by Tricia Jack, CPPA

When a recent assignment gave me the opportunity to read Gordon MacKenzie's book "Orbiting the Giant Hairball,"^[1] I found myself chuckling at the following story:

At a beach cliff in San Diego, a man decides he wants to go down to the ocean to swim. He sees a variety of signs that warn of the danger of the cliffs and thinks that he probably should not go down there. Just as he starts to walk away, he hears laughter from below the cliffs, indicating that *someone* is down there. He decides there must be a way. He thinks: "they made it down there. I must be able to get down there, too."

He goes on: "I scanned the face of the cliff. Safe descent seemed reasonably achievable...I began the climb down." The explorer continues to relate the tale of his descent, describing his ensuing excitement as he made his way down the cliff, ready to take a dip in the ocean. However, the climb was not as easy as he thought. As the footholds gave way, he found himself stuck in a trough with no way of knowing how far the drop was to the ocean. That's when he realized why the danger signs were there. And what did he do when he was in this precarious position? He waited on his "fool's perch," thinking about what to do next.

Eventually, "three men puttering about in the dry sand above the high-tide mark happened to look up and spy [him] on [his] unlikely perch." Knowing that most people who landed on the cliffs were hang gliders, they asked him, "Did you fall off a hang glider?" The explorer describes how he almost choked on the words "No, I'm stuck," as if the very act of admitting that he needed help was way more than he was willing to do.

You'll be glad to know that our explorer was rescued by the San Diego lifeguard. The twist to the tale: as they rescued him, they pointed out the "safe way," the rugged stairs that were less than 100 yards from the maroon incident - the stairs that he couldn't see from where he was standing when he looked down at the beach from the cliff. Imagine how foolish he felt at that point! Then imagine what a fun story and learning experience he would have missed if he'd taken the stairs.

MacKenzie's point is this: to be creative in organizations and to get around the sometimes-beneficial, sometimes-detrimental lines of authority, we sometimes need to go exploring. This takes courage: "Courage to admit idiocy. Courage to acknowledge impasse. Courage to open up to being rescued."

At work, I have had similar experiences as the explorer; times where I have been enthusiastic and excited about a project and then found myself stuck so badly that I can't see a way out; times where I have sat on my figurative "fool's perch," hoping for some inspiration, or wishing that it would just go away; times when I have completely missed the "easy way down" because I have been focused on what is right in front of me instead of looking around for alternatives. The problem is that sometimes we have to try the climb and risk landing on "fool's perch" so that we can see what we are capable of.

Under pressure, we often come up with our best ideas. Find your own hang glider or "fool's perch" and see what you can do.

[1] MacKenzie, Gordon. 1996. "Orbiting the Giant Hairball." New York: Viking Penguin. This story is found in chapter 8, pp. 71-80. All quotes are from within these pages.



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