



Getting Out of Your Comfort Zone

Taking Risks, Trusting your Gut and Becoming a Game Changer!

John Wood

As of this writing, Wikipedia defines the term comfort zone as “a behavioral state within which a person operates in an anxiety-neutral condition, using a limited set of behaviors to deliver a steady level of performance, usually without a sense of risk.”

Though that may sound nice, it does not sound like a recipe for success—especially in our rapidly changing and uber-competitive world.

There was a time when the only types of people who took risks and voluntarily stepped out of their comfort zone were the high-rollers who could afford to take a chance. Now, none of us can afford to NOT take risks. In business, you are asked to get out of your comfort zone time and time again. And, in today’s tech-inundated world, getting out of your comfort zone has become a mandate for success.

Please allow me to briefly tell you my own “getting out of my comfort zone” story. From 1991 until 1999, I was on the fast track at Microsoft in the heyday of the technology boom. I was responsible for significant sectors of Microsoft’s international business and, no doubt like many of the readers of this article, working long hours and on the road constantly. I loved my job, but I was burnt out. During a much-needed three week vacation trekking through the Himalayas in Nepal, I met a man who escorted me to a local Nepalese school that was a two day walk from the nearest road, nestled amongst snow-capped mountains. This short tour became a life-altering event. I was shocked to learn the 450 students did not have a functioning library or even a collection of children’s books. How could this be, I asked the headmaster. He told me “In Nepal, we are too poor to afford education. But until we have education, we will always be poor.” He then turned to me and uttered the nine words that would change my life forever; “Perhaps Sir, you will someday come back with books.”

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Within a year, I would quit the fast track at Microsoft to form Room to Read—a global nonprofit that provides educational opportunities to children in Asia and Africa by establishing libraries and schools, supporting girls' education and publishing local language children's books. Leaving behind the security of a title, paycheck and stock options was not easy. But I knew that, with 775 million people illiterate across the developing world, this little school was simply a microcosm of a much larger problem.

The first library was established in that little Himalayan village of Bahundanda in 1999. I am proud to say that, as of today, our little-organization-that-could is on track to open our 15,000th library in 2013. Rooms to Read's programs have benefitted 7.5 million children and we are on track to reach 10 million by 2015. Getting here was not comfortable by any stretch of the imagination, but we have always been highly motivated, and the children living in these remote communities without books, without the ability to read, without anyone to teach them were more than willing to do whatever it took to have a library filled with local language books. Having the proper motivation can be the genesis of getting out of the comfort zone, taking risks, and creating real change. Personally, I can think of no greater motivation than empowering the children in our programs around the globe.

Leaving a fast-track career path meant I had to acquire an entirely new set of skills—skills that were not yet in my wheelhouse. Starting a non-profit organization has, as they say in the world of diving, a “high degree of difficulty.”

Taking the lessons I had learned from the business world, I set out to run the non-profit with the same business acumen as a corporation. Fundraising was never in my skill set, but it was one of the first things I had to learn. I had to start knocking on doors and asking for money. I needed to learn how to hire local staff in remote places like Cambodia, Nepal and Vietnam. A third big challenge was recruiting and motivating hundreds (now thousands) of volunteers to start Room to Read fund-raising chapters in cities from Atlanta to Zürich, and 50 more in between. My passion and a higher calling demanded I get out of my comfort zone, again and again. Even now I am forced to get out of an ever-evolving level of comfort—twelve years into it. If I’m comfortable, it means there is still work to be done. My personal experience has taught me there are key factors in getting out of your comfort zone and taking calculated risks.

But, first, you have to have a clear vision of where you’re headed. If you’re going to take this bumpy road, it’s important to focus on the destination. When I started Room to Read, I chose a simple and direct tag-line: World Change Starts with Educated Children. I did not want anyone to have to guess about what we’re trying to accomplish.

Second, bold goals attract bold people. The world is full of tiny non-profits, but we did not want to stay small. From day one, I declared that Room to Read would reach 10 million children by 2020. I was told that was a crazy and hubristic number. But that bold goal attracted a lot of bold people to join me in this quest, and I am proud to say that we will actually reach that goal five years early in 2015.

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The third lesson was perhaps the most important: never be afraid to ask for the order. It takes guts to ask someone for money when there is not the same quid pro quo that one gets from a business transaction. But I had to do it anyway, or else millions of children would not have Room to Read in their lives. Thousands of times now, I’ve looked people in the eye, taken a deep breath, smiled, and said “Can I count on you to invest in Room to Read?”

My fourth key lesson learned has been to not get frustrated by small failures. Not everyone I ask for money says yes. But if I let that get me down, then I'm turning a small problem into a larger one. I often remind myself that if a baseball player can hit .350, he'll make \$20 million a year. I'm proud to say that I hit higher than .350, and Room to Read now brings in over \$40 million a year in support. Take that, A-Rod!

The final lesson I've learned? Trust your gut. Leaders are often forced to make quick decisions, despite limited information and often contradictory signals. When a decision has to be made, ideally a leader's brain trust is quickly convened, risks are assessed, and a vigorous debate helps to ensure final decisions are not made in a vacuum. But after the brain races with synapses firing and the neural networks light up with kinetic energy, the center of action moves to an entirely new location—the gut. The gut does not weigh pros and cons. It does not run analysis. The gut just is. When you have all the information you can possibly process, there is no better risk analysis than the gut.

I've learned a lot since the day I jumped out of the Microsoft airplane back in 1999, and thankfully the parachute deployed beautifully. Over 7,500,000 children now have access to schools and libraries because I got outside my comfort zone. This is clearly an area where the business world can learn lessons from the non-profit sector.

Leading companies including Barclays, Credit Suisse, Google, and Microsoft have brought me in to speak at employee meetings and sales conferences to tell my own story of getting outside my comfort zone and challenge those in the business world to do the same. It's always a lively discussion. My favorite part comes at the end. I always ask each employee to pick up pen and paper, and to write down the answer to three questions:

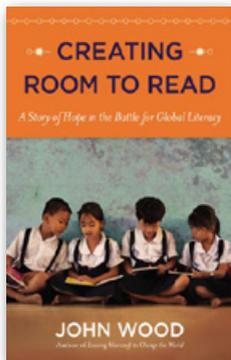
1. What will you do to get outside your own comfort zone before the end of the day today?
2. What will you do in the next week?
3. What will you do this year?

I encourage them to start with a small “outside the comfort zone” vow, and to then go bigger on “this week” and “this year.” The result? Many report to me that I've given them license to think bigger, to kick themselves in the butt and leave their comfort zone—to dare to aim higher.

So in closing, I challenge you: pick up that pen and paper, and try this simple exercise. And if you have interesting results, I'd love to hear about them. (john.wood@roomtoread.org)

Good luck, and here's to life outside the comfort zone! 📖

Info



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | John Wood is a member of the Advisory Board of the Clinton Global Initiative. He was the first-ever Microsoft Alumni of the Year, an award bestowed by Bill and Melinda Gates. He is a five-time winner of *Fast Company's* Social Capitalist Award, , and was named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum. He is a Henry Crown Fellow at the Aspen Institute and was given a Presidential Citation by the American Library Association. The local language children's publishing program he catalyzed at Room to Read was awarded with UNESCO's Confucius Prize for Literacy in 2011. He has twice been named by Barron's magazine as one of the Worlds's 25 Most Effective Philanthropists and was given a Lifetime Achievement Award at this year's Tribeca Film Festival.

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