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Too much friction drives you crazy, but too little leaves you adrift. In this episode, Stanford Professor Bob Sutton and Hayagreeva Rao, professor in the Stanford Graduate School of Business and coauthor of *Scaling Up Excellence*, discuss their quest for the “just right” amount of friction. Sure, you can make structural changes, but you’ll never optimize friction if you don’t understand and deal with what people are feeling.



Transcript

- This technical debt, it starts small, and it grows exponentially.. And by the time you reminds it, you kinda say my God, it's like a volcano.. Friction is huge psychological burden.. - Without friction we would not have fire, and we would not have sparks.. - I gotta get a knife.. (discussant laughs) I gotta hide it.. - We end up spending a lot of time ruminating.. (upbeat music) - Hi, I'm Bob Sutton.. I'm an organizational psychologist and Stanford professor.. And this is the Friction podcast..

(soothing music) On today's episode, we are joined by my colleague and co-conspirator Huggy Rao.. Huggy's a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, and we wrote "Scaling Up Excellence" together.. Huggy and I have heard countless stories about the roadblocks and red tape that drive people crazy at work.. Our goal with the Friction project is to dig into the challenges around organizational friction.. We're thinking about questions such as what causes friction, how can you stop friction, and when is introducing a little friction actually a good thing.. The project is constantly evolving, so on this episode we're going to check in and share some of the big lessons we've learned so far.. (upbeat music) - Friction is kind of a little bit like cholesterol, just like you have good cholesterol and bad cholesterol, you can actually have good friction and bad friction.. When you actually have bad friction, look at the effects on one's own personal initiative.. You gotta get 10 approvals to do something.. You gotta go to 10 silos to get their buy in to do something..

What are you gonna do? You're actually gonna give up.. But at the same time, what we realized, indeed you and I, as we were talking with many of these executives is, hey friction actually can be good.. There are some things you need to kind of slow down.. An extreme example is the case of Alexa.. - I love this story.. - It is a great story, because apparently what happened in Alexa was when Alexa was first introduced, there was actually a young girl who actually said, "Alexa I want you to go and get me a doll house," and sure enough, they got the doll house.. And then the story spread, and evidently, the local news anchor, that evening.... - It's a very expensive doll house.. It was like a \$500 doll house, or something like that.. - Yeah, very expensive..

In, what the news anchor was doing in the broadcast was that evening, he was saying isn't Alexa amazing.. If all that you say is get me a doll house, Alexa'll get you a doll house.. And apparently in the homes that were listening to this TV broadcast, Alexa got activated, and orders actually got placed for doll houses.. And this is an example of something being so.... - Too easy to do.. - Too easy to do, and you instantly gotta put friction in there, if we're not careful.. And one question or one challenge, I think, organizations have is, it's not to say that friction is all bad, nor is it to leap to the opposite conclusion that friction is always good, it's to actually figure out where do you put in the friction.. Where do you take it out from? And I think that's like the core challenge.. - And that's one we keep going back to.. So for example, one things that we've talked about a lot, and is evident on other podcast is that when you don't quite know what you're doing or you're confused or you need to come up with something creative, that's where you need to kind of slow down..

But then you gotta kind of be able to hit the gas and move.. And that's one of the keys, I think to leadership and design is understanding when to slow people down and when to speed them up.. That's certainly one of our big lessons from our scaling research.. - Absolutely, you know.. In, just the other day in class, we were talking about where else would you actually put good friction.. It was interesting that the most dominant things that came up in my MBA class a couple days ago, one is we really need to put friction when we're making risky decisions, big capital outlays and the like.. You don't wanna make it

too easy, 'cause you'll put the trigger, and then, easy to pull the trigger and then, before you know it, you're in trouble.. The second thing is, and I'm curious what you think about it Bob, the second thing that was suggested by a number of students was, putting friction in goal setting and results.. The view was if you make it easy for people to agree on goals, they're actually going to under shoot.. So what you need is, you need stretch..

And for stretch you need friction.. - Oh that's interesting.. - I mean is the.... - That's right, that's evidence based, that we know that the most effective goals are ones that are kinda fifty fifty.. That's when about a 50% chance you're going to make it kinda brings out the best in people, because it keeps them trying, but they don't think that it's just futile.. - Right.. Friction is not a thing but a feeling.. It's very easy to think of friction as a thing, a process, et cetera, but actually what's much more important to pay attention to are the feelings that animate people.. And, it seems to me that what friction can do is, at one extreme, there is friction of the bad kind for individuals and something that's really important to them, they easily respond with disgust.. - Disgust..

- And disgust as we know leads to aversion.. Aversion leads to the cessation of activity.. You don't do anything.. What's important from an organizational point of view is really to kinda be attentive to what is friction actually triggering.. Is it triggering anger or alternatively is it generating feelings of powerlessness? I can't do anything.. Or helplessness, God, I'm stuck.. And then eventually that leads to hopelessness and of course meaninglessness.. The point is understanding each of these emotions requires that we actually pay attention to the remedy.. When you look at friction as a journey, it's actually an emotional journey.. - Yep, yep..

- And the real sort of question is how do you hasten the crossover to the positive emotion's side as opposed to the negative emotion's side, I think is a challenge.. - The way my Jewish mother would put it is you gotta figure out the optimal level of suffering.. (Huggy laughs) She wouldn't put it that way, but that's how she would act.. (upbeat music) So one of the things we've really been talking about a lot that's coming up in the cases we're doing and some of the informal conversations we're having with leaders of all kinds, are two kind of intertwined things which are silos in organizations and decentralization.. So there's all these organizations that we're studying, that we're working with, that they move very quick early on.. And the way they did it was by breaking people into groups or businesses and giving them a lot of autonomy.. And so this is why I'm confused about it, because there's a point where it helps everybody move fast, 'cause I don't have to check with you, you don't have to check with me.. We just do whatever we want, and we just go.. But then all these problems start cropping up.. For example, if a customer goes to three different silos, he or she gets three different answers..

That's a classic thing that happens, since they don't ever coordinate.. - That's right.. - So, or you've got, you talk about technical debt, you got pieces of software that don't fit together.. - Right.. - So, so one of the things that I'm getting more and more confused about is how you strike the balance between having decentralization and breaking things into silo smaller pieces and at the same time having an organization or group that has integrated work where all the pieces fit together.. And so I'm confused about that in terms of friction.. - Let me also proclaim my confusion.. (Bob laughs) You know, we're both in this together.. But the problem with silos, of course, is if you're not careful silos can become islands.. And that's when....

- Islands or enemy territory.. One of the two.. - That's right.. - Or both (laughs).. - Well both.. And you can imagine an archipelago of enemies and then to call it an organization would be obviously, you know, a case of like overreach, if not anything else.. And the interesting thing about silos is you certainly need them, because you do need specialization.. The real question, and this is the hard part is, how do you actually integrate.. And it seems to me here managers and leaders, they overuse the structural methods to integrate.. You know, while we're going to integrate by creating a meeting where people share information..

- Right.. - We're gonna have multiple reporting relationships, matrix structures, you know, all of these kinds of things.. So what when you do that, you're increasing friction again, and you're doing other things.. And so, I think part of what we need to think of is more lightweight kind of integration mechanisms.. And what these integration mechanisms do is they actually make people in silos mindful of what other people are doing.. - Yeah, so it's taking, so one of.... - 'Cause what you really need is we have to understand that integration isn't structural it's cognitive.. It's actually emotional.. And now you've jogged my memory about a fascinating thing that occurred in this tragic episode of the sniper at Washington.. You had a sniper and a little boy, a young boy who were going around....

- Oh yeah, they were run shooting people, just bizarre.. - Shooting people in like.... - Washington DC, yes.. - Yeah, Washington DC.. Maryland area.. They were on the run for like I don't know how long.. But what was kind of interesting was the person who was the head of the counter-terrorism center, one of the things he did was.... It was really amazing.. There were so many entities.. In fact, just for that episode itself, you had the Bureau of Tobacco and Firearms..

You had the Secret Service, 'cause it was occurring in the Washington DC area.. And then you had state, county, local, all the cops kind of involved, FBI, huge thing.. And what was interesting was the way he organized his resources was, he created three tables.. And every table actually had people from each jurisdiction, one person from BATA, one person from FBI, like that, county local cops.. And one table's job was simply to process telephone tips, because there's a lot of noise.. - Right, right.. - And he just didn't want noise to infect the rest of the decision making.. So their job was people would call in and say, you know I think the sniper is traveling in a white van, which turned out to be an error miscue.. This table would actually

disambiguate it.. Then there was another table, again, of multi-, people from multiple silos..

And their job was predict what the sniper's gonna do next.. Go nail the person.. And then you had another table, and my recollection was their mission was, assume you're the sniper, what are you gonna do next.. And what was interesting was he made sure they didn't get together too quickly, because he realized if they got too quickly, it would be an echo chamber in no time.. He needed them to be different.. In fact, he needed them to be silos for a while.. - And then you bring them together.. - Exactly.. But one of the other things he did, which was I thought very clever, was he made sure he wasn't the person briefing the press.. I think they gave it over to the sheriff..

So they said, you know, go in front of national TV, give updates, you know.. And apparently, this person loved the job.. And he was focusing on this.. - Well that's also a friction reduction.. You give somebody a very visible job that they want, so you can actually do your job.. (upbeat music) - We of course know from a tradition of experimental research and social psychology that the more powerful you are, the more tunnel vision you can get.. - And the more stereotypically you can think.. But what amazed me certainly was when top managers actually inaugurate new initiatives, launch transformation plans, change organization structures, want to actually foster innovation.. They seem to be both unaware of the magnitude of the collaborative burden that's placed on people and sometimes how hard it is to actually get things done.. And so, when at the very apex of an enterprise, people are blind to friction, the concern I sort of have is if you're not careful you can inadvertently unleash a vicious cycle where top managers issue more demands..

The rank and file and the middle managers encounter more friction, and basically at the end of it all, they sort of give up.. And then the loop starts again when top managers say oh my God, we gotta do more.. And it's like a treadmill from which you can't kinda get off.. - It is interesting.. One of the things that this reminds me of is sometimes they call this CEO magnification, that CEOs sort of just say random stuff.. - Right.. - And then it's this huge program of activity launches.. And the example I was thinking of was early in my career I did some research on 7-11, the convenient store.. And this was in the '80s, and the CEO, then CEO, his name was Jodie Thompson, in those days went to a 7-11 in Texas.. And he had a rude clerk..

So he went back to the office as a CEO would do and started yelling about this rude clerk.. And he didn't think about it again.. And this caused the 7-11 corporation to go on a, what was about a \$15 million program to increase the quality of service in 7-11 stores.. - Wow.. - And they never told him.. They just did it, 'cause they thought it was important.. And it kinda ended where there was a drawing where every 7-11 manager or owner could enter in the United States and they had Monty Hall of Let's Make a Deal presenting the winner, and all this.. And he found out about it and he couldn't believe it.. He said I was just bitching.. I didn't want you to spend \$20 million..

(Huggy laughs) You think about this all.. And by the way, one thing that came out of it was some research had showed that people do not go to 7-11 stores for courtesy.. They just want to get in and out as quickly as possible.. That's what their scientific research revealed.. So to me that friction blindness stuff is really interesting, this notion that you don't even realize what you're doing to other people, because you're so focused on yourself, and you're so blind to the organization.. - That's exactly right.. As you know, our dear comrade and friend, Perry Klebahn, he has a wonderfully evocative phrase, he calls it the cone of friction.. - The cone of friction.. - You know, which is a nice riff on the cone of silence.. We often focus on the visible triggers of friction..

There's a big background that we overlook.. And the background is in the case of negative friction, it's technical debt, and a.... - Is there sources of friction we don't even realize we're building up? - And like we are constantly accumulating them.. You and I are writing this case about this.... - The certain large company.. - Large company that's kind of done blitz scaling.. For example, they were wanting to be so quick and so fast to get into multiple territories.. So what do you do? You say let's get it done.. Let's kinda worry about documentation later.. Let's kinda worry about bug identification later..

Let's kinda do this later.. Let's do that later.. - And maybe not even follow all the laws (laughs).. - And that too, maybe.. But, the interesting thing is this technical debt, it starts small and it grows exponentially.. And by the time you realize it, and you kinda say my God there's like a volcano.. It can actually explode at any time.. And by then, it's sorta too late.. For all of the listeners here, a simple way to actually think of technical debt is imagine if your handyman put your kitchen sink in front, and you look at the kitchen sink, it looks fine.. You open the door, and you peer underneath, and it's all like pasted together..

You know, there's like gunk.. You know, there's like taping.. There's nothing that's been done.. They just want the water to flow.. They wanna do this like super quick.. That's like a nice, you know, visual image of, from the front of the kitchen sink, of course you're getting water, but if you look underneath, there's just all this unfinished work, un-tendered things.. And it can leak at any time.. It can run dry at any time.. And we actually don't think of technical debt.. - You keep talking about blindness and invisibility..

That's something that we've talked about a lot is that the cone that Perry talks about, this idea of friction blindness.. But, okay, so we all agree.. What you're gonna do to reduce it? - I would say what they need to do is they need to kind of get out of their office, get out of their chair.. And, put themselves in low power situations.. It's only when you're in a low power situation, you're dependent, you actually pay attention to friction.. In, it seems to me that really smart CEOs do that periodically.. (upbeat music) - So one thing that we've been noticing a lot of the organizations, including our own, Stanford,

where we work, is that whenever somebody is excited about their new initiative.. So it could be a new grading system.. It might be a new program for design thinking or something, that they're really excited about it, and they get credit for it and motivation.. But so everybody adds stuff..

- Right.. - And there's all this incentive to add stuff, both emotional and financial, and there's nothing to take it out.. And so, you gotta be really careful when you're passionate about adding something, the question is what is, what's gonna be subtracted, and is your addition worth it for everybody, or is it just for you.. - That's right.. In fact, the other day I was actually talking to a well-known foundation, and they were issuing a new call for proposals.. And I said, but all your proposals have to do with addition.. I said why don't you actually have grants for subtraction.. They actually sorta don't do that, but it's something that we need to be very very mindful of.. Otherwise, all that we're gonna do is we're actually gonna keep on increasing friction.. And it's amazing how senior people can easily, how shall I put it, mislead themselves by using....

For example, you're a C-Suite executive.. You have an all hands meeting.. And you say, hey, we need to be more agile.. And the fact of the matter is many people in the audience, in this town hall meeting, they're probably going to translate agility as, God, the guy wants me to do more with less.. - Yeah, that's right, and faster.. - And faster.. And so, you see the problem.. - Yes.. - I mean.. - That's what we're doing..

We're just kinda killing people in organizations with friction and stress and health care bills.. - I think it's another one of those things we haven't resolved yet, which is who is responsible for, well, removing bad friction and injecting good friction.. And I guess, one of my answers would be everybody.. That in the most functional organization, everybody has the accountability to, well act like they own the place and the place owns me.. So that means that I do what I can to reduce friction.. And I call out others when they introduce destructive friction.. But, can you take us deeper than that when it comes to what might be done to create an organization where you have, you know, the humans dealing with this, not just these abstract structures? - My own view is it's leadership's responsibility.. You know, your job as a leader is very simple.. People are coming to work to work for you.. You actually gotta make it both easy and challenging for them..

How do you do that is your responsibility.. The other thing, and this is something you and I have spoken about, my own sort of view is the leaders are really trustees of the time of their employees.. - Yeah, that's a good line.. - You know, you don't own the employee.. You just have access to that person's time for eight hours, nine hours or whatever it is.. And really it's your job and indeed it's your responsibility to make sure they go back whole at the end of the day.. What is it we do? We create a lot of bad friction and are happy to make, and people go home demoralized, de-energized.. I mean, can you imagine what happens? Surely we can do better.. And, I think the onus clearly is on leadership.. - Okay..

- Well.. - Okay, Saka that sounds good.. But I hate giving leaders too much credit, because I have two issues with it.. One is organizational researchers.. - Right.. - We both have seen a lot.. They only have so much control.. That's the first thing.. - Right.. - They're kind of worth about 20%, give or take..

So that means it's gotta come from other places.. And so, no matter how much faith you have in leadership, if you look at the evidence.. It also to me comes down to people holding themselves accountable and then when we've got colleagues in an organization who are injecting dysfunctional friction.. And you know, the classic one.. Last year in the podcast, we talked about petty tyrants who take pleasure from making life difficult for other people, because their on a power trip, and feel underappreciated.. And in that situation, those of us who are silent, you're very big on silence who say nothing or who even encourage them that sorta like friction enablers or sorta like a toxic enabler.. So I would do a yes and or yes but with the argument that yeah leaders, and I love the idea that leaders.. Was it trustees of employees' time? - Yeah.. - I think that's right, but I think we're trustee's of our own time and of our colleague's time and our customers' time.. We should talk about our customers too..

- That's very true.. (soothing music) - Huggy it's been great to talk to you.. It's just a delight.. It was just as much fun as talking to the last hour when we weren't on the air.. The conversation will continue.. - Absolutely.. - I'm sure we will have you back on the Friction podcast, and, as always, I've learned stuff from you, even though I talk to you all the time.. You're a delightful person.. - Thank you Bob.. (upbeat music) - Friction is an emotional journey..

Too much can make us resentful and unhappy.. But too little leaves us feeling without direction.. If you take one thing from Huggy's episode, I hope it's the knowledge that the cures for Friction and fatigue must include both structural and emotional solutions.. (upbeat music) Please spread the word about the Friction podcast.. Rate and review us on iTunes and share your favorite episodes with your colleagues, your family, and even your therapist.. On the next episode, I will be joined by my producer Rachel Julkowski.. We'll talk about the lessons we've learned this season, the people we've met, and the cures our guests have recommended for facing down friction.. And now for the final tangent.. - I mean I sort of think of people who join organizations, I'm kind of looking at hey what kind of muscles are you looking at, and the muscle that I kind of look at the most is helpfulness, because if you don't have helpfulness in your DNA, you really don't care about other people, then you won't, you'll waste everybody's time.. You'll do all of these things..

It's kinda helpfulness to me is the important thing, because if you don't have the urge to help, you don't have the urge to improve.. You don't have the urge to do things.. People who listen often have a bigger help muscle, 'cause you.... - They're not

just thinking about themselves.. - Exactly.. (upbeat music) - We can't do this without you.. Tell us what's driving you crazy.. And what are you doing to make life better in your organization, for yourself, and for the people that you work with.. Please send us your friction stories, tips, and tricks.. We'd love to hear from you via Twitter at eCorner or please send us an email at stvp dash eCorner at Stanford dot edu..

(upbeat music) The Friction podcast is a Stanford eCorner original series brought to you by Stanford Technology Ventures Program and Designing Organizational Change.. Friction is produced by Rachel Julkowski and Alli Rico.. Jake Smith and Steiff Studios are our editor and audio engineers.. Suzy Allan and Victoria Johnson are our writing and marketing team.. Daniele Stussi is our designer and digital products manager.. And I'm Bob Sutton.. Thanks for joining us.. This is the Friction podcast.. (upbeat music)..