

URL: <https://ecorner.stanford.edu/clips/good-friction-explicit/>

Bob Sutton, Stanford professor emeritus of management science and engineering and co-author of "The Friction Project," observes that friction isn't always bad. He gives the example of a military employee who successfully pushed back against using a non-FDA approved device invented by Elizabeth Holmes, who has since been discredited because the device didn't work.



Transcript

- We've been talking about bad friction, 00:00:04,530 but I wanna talk about good friction, and the comparison I'm loving to make these days is, of course, we all know the dropout Elizabeth Holmes, who was briefly on campus here, and you also probably all know that she tried to push through, you know, that machine, that blood testing machine, which didn't work, I think it's called the Edison, it did not get FDA approval.. And there was sort of, if you read, you know, the "Bad Blood", John Carreyrou's book about it, there's sort of a moment where she tried to get it on U.S.. Army helicopters to blood test, and she had Mad Dog Mattis, a four star general, pushing on her behalf, and some sort of lowly bureaucrat pushed back against her, and one of the reasons was she didn't have FDA approval.. And I like comparing Elizabeth Holmes to two more recent graduates, Greta Meyer and Amanda Calabrese, if I'm pronouncing her name right, they started a company called Sequel.. They went through, by the way, just about every entrepreneurship class that we have at Stanford.. Sequel is reinventing the modern tampon.. Both of them graduated, they got \$5 million worth of venture capital and just got FDA approval in August.. So to me, there's bad friction and there's good friction.. I don't use a tampon and you probably guessed that, but if I was sticking one of those things in my body, I would want FDA approval.. So that's a case where I think that friction was a good thing..

And I think it's also cool they both graduated by the way.. - I have a follow up question 00:01:34,920 that doesn't have anything to do with tampons, but going back to Mad Dog Mattis, (Robert laughs) I have met Mad Dog Mattis, and I'm actually curious for the individual that you wrote about, actually no spoilers, go read the book, who did push back - Yes.. 00:01:48,720 - successfully, 00:01:51,570 how does one have the backbone to do that? What kind of encouragement do you have for an individual like that? - Well, so this guy 00:01:56,280 was sort of a lowly defense department, he was like a lieutenant colonel, and when he retired, they gave him all sorts of awards for fighting back to Mad Dog Mattis.. And if we want to talk about fighting back, this is the problem of psychological safety.. So either you need to be in a place that's safe, you need to have an exit option, I always say this to my students, I've got an asshole boss, I wanna quit immediately, and I say, "How big is your mortgage, who do you have to support?" and so forth.. So a lot of it depends on the option.. And then there's some people who are simply so brave that they're kind of suicidal and, bless you, but I don't want to, you know, be the child who depends on your rent, for example.. - Hang on.. 00:02:35,130 One thing that you started with that's quite interesting is incentives, right? So the fact that this person when he retired was awarded all these things.. - By his colleagues..

00:02:45,930 for this kind of friction fixing.. - Well, to Mattis's credit, 00:02:49,860 Mattis sort of made the guy fly down to him and talk with him, and Mattis sort of argued with him for an hour and raised his hands and said, "You're right." So Mattis didn't just bulldoze him.. This guy had the backbone to argue with Mattis, and then, and Mattis said, "You're right." So in that case, everybody kind of did the right thing...