Slipping, Falling Down, Gravity, and Your Career

By *Harrison Barnes*

Over the past few years my wife has watched a television show called *Project Runway* pretty religiously. Since she likes to watch television in the evenings after our daughter has gone to bed, I have seen countless episodes of this show. It involves young, aspiring clothing designers who are given assignments to make various outfits, and they ultimately participate in little runway shows with models and judges for each design. After each runway show, one aspiring designer is sent home, and the remaining designers are left to compete during the next episode of the show. The designer who wins is typically given immunity from being sent home at the next round of competition.

For the majority of the show, the designers are creating their outfits for the competition. Each of the designers gets stressed out, and some of the contestants psych out the others, criticize the others, and more. Then there are the designers who do not participate in the politics going on around them; instead they just stay focused on their work. Some of the people are very creative, and they really try to do their own thing, whereas some others are not as creative, and they tend to copy others. Some contestants have good work habits; others have bad work habits. Some contestants cheat, while others are fair. Some of the designers isolate themselves from the group, and others lead the group. However, regardless of all of this, the end result is always the same: One person will win each competition--and one person will lose.

Every possible conflict that occurs in the office and in our careers occurs on this show, and it is for this reason that I actually enjoy it a great deal. In every career, people are trying to get traction and stay in the game. People are seeking to improve. People do not want to drop out of the game, and they want to stay engaged at all times. Some people get psyched out by others, and some do not.

My favorite part of *Project Runway* is when the host of the show, Heidi Klum, says, "In fashion, you are either in or you're out."

This statement encapsulates the main message of the show, but it is also a terrific metaphor for your career--whatever it may be--because in your career (and life) being "in" or "out" is, in my mind, the equivalent of meaning you can either

- Fall down or slip backwards, or
- Move forward and keep growing.

When you are part of the working world, you are typically either moving forward and achieving something of significance, or you are slipping, or have fallen down. The challenge is that virtually every one of us will start slipping at some point. In professional sports, athletes begin to get old and their performance can start to slip. Rock stars get older, and their appearances often start to change; suddenly they are no longer as energetic or exciting on stage, or their sounds are no longer catchy to audiences. However, aside from jobs that entail performing on the field or on the stage, there are countless other jobs in which we can hold our own against time, and prevent our performance from slipping for some time. Kirk Kerkorian, for example, is an extremely successful person in finance. He plays tennis several times a week and keeps busy in his profession--and he is in his 90s. Kerkorian is an example of someone who keeps moving forward despite his age.

One of the things that people seem to love to do is to talk about others' misfortunes. For example, when I am out and about around town, I often learn about stuff such as which neighbors are having their homes foreclosed, who lost their job, who is getting divorced, who has a substance abuse problem, and more. News about people slipping and falling down in their lives and careers seems to spread very quickly. In fact, news about bad things happening to people spreads much more quickly, and tends to be much more interesting to most people, than good news. We hear stories about people falling down on a daily basis for a simple reason: it is very common for people to fall down. Your challenge in your career and in your life is to be one of the people who do not fall down. Instead, you want always to be moving forward and growing.

I want to further address the concept of "slipping." Many people are slipping due to things within their control. If you are slipping, you are not doing well for one reason or another.

- You may not be appreciated in your job.
- You may be bored or disliking your work.
- Your work may be criticized at the office.
- You may be experiencing problems related to your ability to accomplish the work you are given.
- You may be making careless mistakes.
- You may not be getting raises.
- You may be getting demotions.
- You may be in the wrong industry, or in an industry that is dying.

If you are slipping, you will eventually and almost always end up falling down. This is just the way it is. You simply cannot remain slipping for a long period of time and expect to do well in the long run.

People typically find themselves slipping for two reasons. First, it may be due to their own performance, decisions, and things within their control. Second, it may be due to things that are outside of their control but which, nevertheless, they can and should be dealing with. Regardless of why you are slipping, it is important that you take action.

If you are slipping because of things within your control, you need to fix yourself. The problem with slipping is that once you start, it is not easy to stop. Think about being on a hill covered with ice. Once you loose traction, it is difficult to regain it. This is the force of gravity: It is easier to move down than to move up. Because slipping is so easy, most people who begin

slipping have a more difficult time turning around than they do simply sliding down.

Slipping for reasons that have to do with you personally may have to do with

- your work habits,
- your self-discipline,
- your attitude,
- your behavior,
- your unrealistic pay demands,
- your reliability,
- your skill on the job, or
- your ability to get along with coworkers.

If you are slipping for reasons like this, which are within your control, then you need to fix yourself--or put yourself in an environment in which you will be valued. Taking a brutal self-inventory and fixing these issues is often the most important thing you can do. Fixing yourself is not easy. Many people refuse to fix themselves once they start slipping, and they end up spending their entire lives slipping and falling down. Is there anything you are doing that is causing you to slip? If there is, you need to take a good hard look at whatever it is and change it.

A second type of slipping takes place when you are brought down with others who are already slipping. It is like holding hands with a bunch of people who are sliding down an icy hill. You do not want to be brought along, and you need to let go as soon as the others start to slip. You do not want any part of slipping.

I have met a number of people recently who are in businesses that are sliding backward. Just in the past week, I met two people in the advertising industry on separate occasions who were slipping. One man whom I spent some time with at a party just had his salary cut at the advertising agency he is with. If an agency is cutting salaries, this is typically a sign that things are sliding backward. If an entire industry is cutting salaries and laying people off, this is an even worse sign. In many industries at the moment, including advertising, newspapers, magazines, manufacturing, and others--entire companies--and indeed, even entire industries--seem to be slipping. If you are in an industry that is slipping, heed the signs. This is like an entire busload of people sliding down the icy hill: Everyone on the bus is powerless, and even if they were to all work together, they could not keep the bus from slipping.

Is the group you are with *slipping* or *moving forward*? Are *you* slipping or moving forward? You want to always be moving forward, not slipping backward. Some people spend years of their lives and careers slipping backwards. This is a huge mistake. If you are slipping, nothing is more important than taking immediate action to fix this.

When I was in my 20s, my grandmother went into an assisted living community. When people moved into this community, they got their own apartment, and someone came and cleaned the apartment for them maybe one day per week. Residents could get groceries and prepare meals in their own apartments. For me, visiting my grandmother was not a bad thing, and it was no different from if I had been visiting her in a nice condominium, for example.

However, the community was a larger sort of installation, and in addition to the nice apartments, there were other areas of the property to accommodate the residents. As people got older, they would stop making their own dinner and would go down to a cafeteria each day. They might be able to make some cereal each morning back inside their apartments, and perhaps even a light lunch, but the home would make them their dinner. Then, eventually, they would start going down to the cafeteria for all of their meals. Soon, the cleaning service would come every day to the apartment because residents could not clean as much on their own. Then, after some time, the person would be moved to another apartment that was similar, but where there was a nursing station on the same floor. Ultimately, the person would be moved into a hospital type room, and then another after that, which is where they would die.

I have witnessed this progression not just with my grandmother, but with numerous people who have gotten old and sick throughout the years. When someone is moved to another area of the nursing home people always say "it is just until they get better" from this or that; however, the person never gets better. They always get sicker and are moved to another area of the hospital sometime later. Once the person starts to slip, they never stop slipping, and they rarely go back to where they were.

This is the progression for most of us who will live long natural lives. We will continue to slip more and more as we progress in our old age, and eventually we will be gone. The warning signs for someone dying in a nursing home are very clear. In our careers, though, the signs of slipping are not as apparent.

If you are with a group of people who have been slipping for long enough, or if you personally have been slipping for long enough, eventually you will fall down. Falling down means being called into a private office with your boss and the head of human resources and being told you are losing your job. Falling down is when you are unemployed and cannot find another job. Falling down is one of the worst things that can happen to you, which is why it is so important to recognize when you are slipping.

I encounter people on a daily basis who have lost good jobs and cannot find another. These people are typically frustrated and unhappy because their life has been altered in a significant and painful way. When I get the opportunity to speak with people who have fallen down in their careers and in their lives, I view them as being at an incredible crossing because, at that point in time, they have to decide if they are going to get up and start moving forward again or stay where they are. You need to fight the gravity that keeps you down when you have fallen. *Stand up and fight.*

Many people I meet are very quick to tell me things like their titles, what they are doing, and what they have done. This is especially true of men, and at the risk of being called sexist, I believe that men in general take these things more seriously than women. Men love to brag and talk about their various accomplishments when they are doing well (more so than women, I think). In bragging about their various accomplishments, it is as if men are saying, "Look at me, I have not slipped. I am still standing up!"

To return to the topic of spreading bad news, I think the reason that bad news is more interesting to us than good news is that we are all afraid of falling down too. We are so obsessed with our fear of falling down that we are more interested in learning about danger and negative things than positive things. At some point you are going to fall down. You are going to lose a job, get a massive pay cut, have a difficult time finding a job, get in trouble on the job, or something along those lines. Something bad happens to almost everyone in his or her career and life at one point or the other, and everyone falls down.

If you do not suffer a dramatic fall, then you will, at the very least, start slipping at some point. You will stop making progress and start moving backward. Slipping is a dangerous thing as well. You can only slip for so long before you fall down completely.

You may have started *slipping* 10 years ago and have been slipping ever since. Many people slip for years and do everything they can to hold on before they lose their job and fall down. You may have fallen down 10 years ago and never gotten up. We all slip and we all fall at various points in time, but you cannot give up once you have started slipping or after you have fallen down.

It is what we do when we slip or fall that makes all the difference. Gravity is a force that slows down most people's achievement and ability to reach various goals in their lives. Unless you continue to push through, that force of gravity in your career will stop you in your tracks. *Resist this gravity in order to keep yourself from slipping or falling, and nothing else can stand between you and your dreams.*

THE LESSON

In work and in life, everyone slips at some point. Left unchecked, however, a slip become difficult to stop and turn into a fall. People slip either because of things within their control, or because of things outside of their control that they should nevertheless be addressing. You must take action when you are slipping, whatever the reason for the slip may be, and don't let gravity hold you back.

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