

Leaders learn focus from crossing 'freakout point'

By Del Jones, USA TODAY

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[Abridged]

To first-time parachuters, the "freakout point" arrives 2 miles above the ground when the plane door opens to a sky of noise, the pressure drops and jumpers are struck with such anxiety that they can hardly breathe.

"When you step on that strut, it is the moment of truth. Total focus," says Howard Putnam, former CEO of Southwest Airlines and Braniff International, who first jumped 24 years ago and went for it a second time this month. "It was good for my internal ego. It really makes you focus on the priority at the moment and forget all your other stress or problems."

The freakout point is that fear threshold you must push yourself past. CEOs say crossing it provides lessons useful in business and life. **There's the significance of knowing that what frightens can be survived, as well as the importance of concentrating when concentration is all but impossible.**

Preparation is key to facing freakout points, they say, and it's important to react yet not over-react. CEOs say the experience teaches that opportunities lost from inaction are often riskier than action, and the best way into a cold swimming pool is not by tiptoe, but by plunge.

Confronting the freakout point attracts people from all walks, but CEOs and others of accomplishment seem to have a special passion. Not every CEO is a moth to the flame. Certainly, many find thrill enough in an elevator ride to the penthouse. But others like to be scared to the point that they no longer understand simple instructions.

The freakout point isn't just about jumping from planes. CEO surfers know what a freakout point is. Skiers do. Certainly mountain climbers do, and Canadian businessman Werner Berger at 69 is about to try to become the oldest North American to scale Mount Everest, a quest that has taken the life of one climber for every 11 who succeed. He hopes to reach the summit sometime in late May.

"I wonder why am I doing this. Am I nuts? What am I trying to prove?" Berger asked in an e-mail sent from base camp.

Good question. Tom Purves, CEO of BMW North America, rides motorcycles in the rain on twisty roads. Micron Technology CEO Steve Appleton flies aerobatics. In 2004 he stalled and crashed from 25 feet off the ground and survived with a last-second rudder adjustment that elevated the plane's right wing. He wonders why teenagers take risks when they have their whole lives ahead of them, while those older and accomplished play it safe.

Why do CEOs line up like teens at a bungee jump? Most say it isn't thrill-seeking. Former 7-Eleven CEO Jim Keyes hates amusement park rides, yet he used his first paycheck 30 years ago to begin flying lessons and recently decided to get a helicopter rating to "push the envelope on his comfort zone."

Some push that envelope more than others. Berger wrote by e-mail that his biggest test came on Cerro Aconcagua in Argentina. At over 22,800 feet, it's the highest mountain in the Americas and the Southern Hemisphere. He encountered a mountain stream with no safe place to cross. Finally, after 40 minutes, he jumped across, landing on an 80-degree slope with but a single foothold and hand grab between life and death.

"The adrenalin was pumping. I knew it was risky and at the same time I knew I could make it," Berger wrote. "The euphoria when I landed was worth the risk."

Different kinds of freakouts

Freakout points don't require the risk of injury or death, just enough fear to take the breath away, enough that it takes fortitude to keep from backing out. To some that could be as simple as singing karaoke at the company party. Perhaps the most common freakout point comes with public speaking, and Iron Mountain CEO Richard Reese remembers being drafted early in his career to do a last-minute presentation on a technical subject he knew zero about.

Sun Microsystems' Scott McNealy, who excels in hockey and golf and is one of the best athletes ever to rise to CEO, was replaced in 2006 by Jonathan Schwartz. One look at Schwartz and his ponytail tells you that he won't be taking any body checks on the ice, but he became one of the first CEOs with enough guts to write a blog that invites relentless online comments from critics known as "flamers." That may not rise to the level of freakout point, but leaders dating back to Napoleon have been insecure about accepting criticism, and there remain few CEOs of major companies who blog.

With freakout points, success isn't critical. The internal mileage comes from facing down the fear. Alfred Edmond, editor of *Black Enterprise* magazine, entered his first bodybuilding competition in 1999 in Sleepy Hollow, N.Y., walking on stage oiled up and in "skimpy shorts." He finished last in the most-novice division, yet he describes the same fear and euphoria as those who jump from planes.

Willingness to embrace discomfort and face an occasional freakout point may be what separates leaders from talented desk jockeys and "really smart people who work for other people," Edmond says. "If you don't test the muscle by putting yourself in uncomfortable situations, the muscle doesn't grow. It shrinks," he says.

Personal growth on the slopes

Skiers of all abilities encounter freakout points on bunny slopes to glaciers, says Dan Egan, a pioneer of extreme skiing and author of *Courage to Persevere*. The only variables are speed, trees, deep powder or vertical drop, whatever combination brings them to an apprehensive stop. Egan is regularly hired by CEOs and other executives for \$550 to \$850 a day to confront freakout points on skis. He uses the "rubber band" method of taking them to the freakout point and then back temporarily to expand their comfort zone.

"We try and teach people to use fear as a motivator to do things correctly," Egan says. "Success is learned through failure, and confidence is gained as skill levels build."

Meeting job freakouts head-on

Edmond, of *Black Enterprise* magazine, says it's important to face freakout points off the job because, like it or not, freakout points will present themselves on the job. After finishing last in his first bodybuilding competition he went on to compete again. Though he never won, he steadily improved.

"I may not have turned defeat into victory, but I learned that I can survive to fight again," Edmond says.