



LYLE'S LAWS

Lyle's Law of Becoming

OUR INSTRUCTOR STAN was a bit of a nervous sort—and justifiably so. He was engaged in teaching five neophyte sailors how to maneuver a 37-foot sailboat around the waters of Long Island Sound and hoping to get all of us—and the boat—safely ashore again. As any boater knows, one of the most critical and difficult parts of boating is docking. It was in drilling us on this operation that poor Stan had an ongoing flirtation with a heart attack. He had more ways of using the word “slow” in a sentence than I ever imagined possible.

Of course, Stan’s admonition to approach the pier slowly was good advice, but it didn’t completely cover the operation. The limit of “slow” is “stop,” and if the boat stops too far from the pier, the skipper’s goal has not been achieved. The perfect landing is when the boat’s velocity and its distance from the pier reach zero at exactly the same time. To achieve this, the skipper must be aware of not only the boat’s position, but its velocity as well. Control-systems engineers call this velocity input “rate feedback” and recognize its essential role in stabilizing a system.

Velocity—or rate of change—is important in many different kinds of systems. While you need to know where you are, it is often even more essential to know how fast you are going and in which direction you are heading. When applied to human beings, this becomes Lyle’s Law of Becoming: *What you are becoming is as important as what you are doing.*

In your working life, you are expected to do a job, no matter whether you are self-employed or work for a large corporation. To prepare yourself for doing that job, you have invested a lot of years, considerable sums of money, and an enormous amount of energy gaining an education and the required experience. As a result, you probably now find yourself in a very good position. But look at that word, “position.” It is where you are. It is what you are doing. It says nothing, however, about what you are becoming. This requires some separate attention.

Such an observation could engender an admonition to seek a graduate degree or to be involved in continuing education. While these are important career-development activities, they may be both more than you need and less than you need. There are lots of good jobs that don’t require an advanced degree, and it may be hard to find another short course on just the right topic. Taking care of what you are becoming may require some kind of continuing education, but it also demands something more. Just what it demands will vary from person to person, but there is a simple way to check your velocity.

Start by asking yourself this simple question, “What can I do today that I couldn’t do a year ago?” If the answer is “nothing,” that would suggest that you are becoming just what you are today. And that’s probably not good enough. Your speed equals zero.

If, on the other hand, you can list some new skills, new capabilities, new relationships, you do have some speed. Now you can check your direction (the other component of velocity) by moving on to the second question, “Does anyone care?” or, more pointedly, “Will anyone pay me to use my new bag of tricks?” And then, “Will I *like* doing that?”



If your answers to both are positive, hey! You’re on your way. If not, you need to take another look at what you are becoming. You may need some more education, or a job rotation, or to attend some conferences, or to get involved in your professional society, or...what? Whatever it takes to become what *you* want to become.

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Don’t confuse this with goal setting. I know that a lot of career gurus advise you to set concrete goals and then to pursue them. I won’t quarrel with that technique, but I know a lot of highly successful people who didn’t have any specific goals, but who instead concentrated on just

doing a great job, gaining a lot of diverse experience, and seeing what opportunities might pop up. In other words, they didn’t worry about where they were going, but they did watch what they were becoming.

While I have been talking about individuals and their professional careers, this Law applies just as well to managers. Yes, as a manager, you have a job to do, and if you don’t get it done, you won’t be a manager for long. But while you and your group are doing the job, spend a little time thinking about what you are collectively becoming. If you are becoming the group that you already are, that’s not good enough; because the jobs you are going to be asked to do next year are not the jobs you are

doing now. You will have to upgrade your computers and get more advanced software and maybe a new set of instruments for the lab. And while you are at it, don't forget to upgrade your people and, of course, yourself as well. Pay attention to what your group is becoming, individually and collectively.

Of course, we are not just workers and managers. Engineers are people—the opinions of some Dilbert readers notwithstanding. In our personal lives, too, we are not only being; we are in the process of becoming. Our actions say something about what we are, but they also help determine what we will be. Take food for instance—a perfect example of how our behavior determines what we are becoming. I know if I didn't limit (I didn't say eliminate) my consumption of cookies and pies, I would become about 220 pounds. I really want to become 210, partly because a weight of 14 stone sounds so cool but mostly because I would be healthier. I'll get there.

Other behaviors have their impact. Giving—even a little bit—will turn you into a giving person. Constant complaining will turn you into a gloomy person—not to mention a pariah. Saving and wise investing will turn you into a millionaire. Spending more than you earn will turn you into a debtor. Being friendly will make you a friend. Voting will make you responsible. Lying will make you a liar. Well, you get the idea. What you are doing (e. g., saving, lying) is important. What you are becoming (a millionaire, a liar) may be even more so.

Once again, I will quote Lyle's Law of Laws: *The better the law, the more general its applicability.* Based on that, the Law of Becoming—*What you are becoming is as important as what you are doing*—is a good law.

—Lyle D. Feisel, Ph.D., P.E., Iowa Alpha '61

HEADQUARTERS VISITORS

Laura Morris Edwards, *Tennessee Beta '92,* Knoxville, TN; April 23, 2004.

Craig A. Elder, *Michigan Epsilon '00,* Detroit, MI; April 30, 2004.

Curtis D. Gornulinski, *Michigan Epsilon '01,* Detroit, MI; April 30, 2004.

Colleen L. Hill, *Michigan Epsilon '97,* Detroit, MI; April 30, 2004.
Jana M. Beuerle, *Guest,* Detroit, MI; April 30, 2004.

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