

LYLE'S LAWS

Lyle's Law of Comfort

Over the years, my wife has learned to be wary whenever I start a sentence with, “What would you think of...?”—and with good reason. For example, one of the times she heard those words was when I came home and said, “Honey, what would you think of spending a year in China?” To put this in context, we had been married something over 10 years, six of which had been spent living in student housing, planning for the day when we could have a normal lifestyle with a house, a garden, pets, the whole works. Finally we had those things: a job as an associate professor, a home in the country, three children, two cats (one a little psychotic, but hey...) and even a garden. Now comes the suggestion that we suspend all this, pack up, and move to China (actually Taiwan) for a year. This would mean a change of plans. It meant that we would have to rent the house, figure out how to get half way around the world, find a school for the kids, and on and on. It meant, in short, leaving our comfort zone. We weren't sure we wanted to do that. But we did it. And we're glad we did.

Leaving your comfort zone is not an easy thing to do, but, whenever we have done so, we have generally been well rewarded. Sure, there have been some bad moments. There have been some times when we were pretty uncomfortable. But in the end, we're glad we took the risk. For all of us, the comfort zone can get pretty cozy, and leaving it requires some effort and some courage. But the cozy comfort zone can be a dangerous place, precisely because we don't want to leave it. Hence, Lyle's Law of Comfort: *Beware the cozy comfort zone.*

I am a member of an investment club, and I enjoy going there and pretending I know something about picking stocks. Fortunately, I have picked enough winners that my fellow members put up with my pretense. Among the many things I have learned from my more skillful colleagues is an appreciation for the risk/reward relationship. If you want to enjoy the possibility of high rewards (return on investment), you must suffer the possibility of large losses. In other words, you have to get out of your comfort zone. A risk must be taken.

But there are different kinds of risks. One is the kind typified by the old joke about the famous last words of redneck drivers; “Here. Hold my beer. I'm gonna try something.” That kind of risk is not very well thought through and is made more palatable by a lack of information and more acceptable by impaired judgment. That driver may have left his comfort zone, but he didn't have a very good reason for doing so. In fact, the word *reason* may not even apply here.

Another kind of risk is the risk of getting caught doing something you shouldn't, like breaking the law. The folks at Enron took that kind of risk when they cooked the books, and some of their auditors did it when they looked the other way. Less dramatic—but no different in principle—is the driver who decides to drive 85 in a 55 mph zone. Or the person who cheats on an exam or a spouse and risks the chance of getting caught. Again, they may be outside their comfort zone, but that's not the kind of risk we're talking about here.

So, if we agree to exclude the foolish risk and the risk of getting caught, let's look some more at the notion of getting

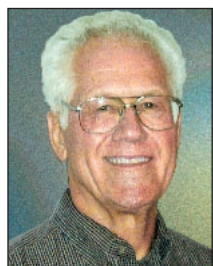
outside that cozy comfort zone.

In the engineering process, we often need to get outside our comfort zones. Most real-life engineering designs require compromise, and compromise requires an element of discomfort. Any engineer would be most comfortable making a product that is 100 percent safe and reliable, but we know that can rarely be done. So designers need to leave their comfort zone—or perhaps more precisely, stretch that zone—to accept a design that is as reliable as possible while still possessing the other features it needs to meet the design requirements, like cost. Whether leaving the zone or stretching it, the coziness has to be overcome.

Perhaps the coziest comfort zones of all are the ones we create in our careers. It is easy to get into a position where we are good at what we are doing, we are amply rewarded and secure, and we feel we are making a contribution. What's not to like? But that's just the point; a zone can be comfortable simply because it doesn't contain anything that we dislike. That doesn't seem to be a very high standard for living one's life. But it sure can be cozy.



I write this law with some trepidation, because I know that many readers of THE BENT are, as they say, of a certain age. The Law of Comfort should not prompt any of us to say, "I should have ... I could have ... I might have" So what? We did what we did.



That's that. What the law should do is prompt our younger readers to ask themselves from time to time if they are getting too comfortable. It should be considered whenever an opportunity

comes along that is a little scary, a little uncertain, a little uncomfortable. To take advantage of such an opportunity, you have to get outside your comfort zone. You have to leave the comfort zone to take a new job, to start a business or, for that matter, to get married. But the chances are—I really believe this—the chances are you'll be glad you did.

So beware the cozy comfort zone. It is a dangerous place because it is so hard to leave.

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

Author's Note: I wish to close this column with a brief tribute to my old friend, Jim Froula, as he retires from Tau Beta Pi. He has served our Society well for these many years, and I'm sure he will remain a loyal Tau Bate in retirement. Jim honors the Law of Comfort (Grand Canyon, Kilimanjaro, Half Dome. Good grief!) and, indeed, was the one who recruited me to write a column for THE BENT and suggested the name of Lyle's Laws. Happy hiking, old friend.

And beware the cozy comfort zone.
—L.D.F.

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