

Why Fix If It Ain't Broken?

Idea In Short

The “okay plateau” describes a state where individuals, teams, or organizations perform adequately but stop growing, risking stagnation and decline. Breaking free requires deliberate effort: stepping outside comfort zones to embrace failure, emulating skilled peers, seeking constructive feedback, and applying a scientific approach of hypothesis and experimentation. Recognizing this plateau and committing to continuous improvement fosters renewed energy, innovation, and competitive resilience across all levels of performance.

Change can be a hard sell when things are going well. But when organizations, teams, or individuals find themselves comfortably cruising along with steady performance, it's easy to wonder why change is necessary at all. If everything is fine, why shake things up? However, staying on the plateau of mediocrity might eventually cost more than taking the risk to improve. This article explores how to move off that comfortable, yet stagnant, plateau toward growth and innovation.

The Okay Plateau

The term “okay plateau” describes a stage where everything is functioning at an acceptable level, but no one is pushing for more. This concept was introduced by Joshua Foer in his book *Moonwalking with Einstein: The Art and Science of Remembering Everything*, where he reflects on reaching a level in his memory training where he couldn't seem to improve any further. He called it the “okay plateau”—a place of adequacy where progress stalls.

The Okay Plateau in Individuals

For an individual, the okay plateau occurs when they have mastered their tasks, know their job inside and out, and can handle daily responsibilities without breaking a sweat. While they may not be failing, they also aren't growing. Everything is comfortable, but this comfort can

lead to complacency.

The Okay Plateau in Teams

When a team reaches the okay plateau, they are still hitting their KPIs and working well together, but there is a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. Morale is generally good, but there's no real excitement for new projects or challenges. The energy that once fueled innovation has plateaued, leaving the team on autopilot.

The Okay Plateau in Organizations

On a company-wide level, the okay plateau manifests when budgets are met, growth is steady, and market positions are stable. Leadership may appear cohesive, and day-to-day operations are running smoothly. But just like individuals and teams, organizations can't sustain this level of performance forever. While it might seem ideal, the okay plateau can set the stage for decline, especially as competitors begin to innovate and push past you.

Getting Off the Plateau

So, how do you get off the okay plateau? The first step is recognizing that you're on it. Once you acknowledge it, you need to actively push for improvement. Foer suggests four key strategies to help individuals, teams, and organizations break free from this stagnation.

Get Out of Your Comfort Zone

When you're on the plateau, you're not making mistakes, which means you're not learning anything new. To get off the plateau, you need to step outside your comfort zone. For individuals, this could mean taking on a new task, proposing an innovative idea, or learning a new skill. The key is to fail consciously, learn from your mistakes, and improve.

In a team setting, this strategy might involve trying new processes or setting ambitious goals. Teams should be aware of this challenge and embrace failure as part of the learning process. At the organizational level, controlled failures are often necessary to push for growth. Small-scale experiments or pilot projects allow for risk while limiting potential damage.

Walk in the Shoes of Someone More Skilled

Imitating someone who is more confident or skilled can help you grow. This strategy is based on the idea of "fake it until you make it." By acting with the confidence and ability of someone further along in their career, you push yourself to rise to their level.

For teams, this could mean setting new performance benchmarks. If a company has a close competitor who excels in certain areas, the organization should strive to emulate their success. The goal is to be as good, if not better, than the best in the field.

Seek Critical Feedback

Feedback is an essential part of growth. While some may find feedback difficult to accept, it is crucial for improving performance and breaking the plateau. Just like a writer relies on editorial feedback to refine their skills, individuals need to seek out constructive criticism to get better.

At the individual level, this could mean asking for feedback from supervisors, peers, or customers. Teams can gather feedback from other departments or clients, and organizations can rely on surveys and reviews to gain insights into their overall performance. By actively seeking feedback, teams and organizations can identify areas for improvement and innovation.

Treat What You Do Like a Science

Approaching problems like a scientist involves creating hypotheses, testing them, and then analyzing the results. This structured approach allows for controlled experimentation and learning. In a team or organizational setting, this could mean brainstorming new ideas, setting clear roles, and executing projects with defined goals.

After executing a project or change initiative, reviewing the results is essential. What worked? What didn't? With this feedback, you can tweak the process and repeat the cycle, always pushing for improvement.

The Path Forward

While cruising along on the okay plateau isn't necessarily a bad thing, staying there can be dangerous. Awareness is key—recognizing when you or your team feels unchallenged,

when energy levels are low, and when innovation is missing. The next step is to take deliberate action to break free from this state of inertia.

By using the strategies mentioned above—getting out of your comfort zone, seeking feedback, emulating others, and testing new ideas—you can develop a culture of continuous improvement. The benefits of doing so are twofold:

1. you create a sense of purpose and growth within your team or organization, and
2. you protect yourself from being overtaken by more innovative competitors

Getting off the okay plateau takes effort, but with intentional action, it's possible to move toward greater achievements. Whether you're an individual, a team, or an entire organization, the key to success lies in constantly striving to improve and innovate.

Summary

Comfortable yet complacent, the okay plateau hampers growth for individuals, teams, and companies alike. To escape it, one must challenge existing habits by embracing risk, learning from others, welcoming feedback, and systematically testing new ideas. This cycle of conscious growth rekindles motivation and drives innovation. Awareness and intentional action against stagnation create not only personal and organizational purpose but also safeguard long-term relevance and success in a competitive environment.