

Women Entrepreneur Guest Blogger

On the ground with women entrepreneurs

Quit Fighting All Those Fires

By: Hilary Kaye | 04/29/2010

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Who wouldn't like a keynote titled "Stuck!?" Everyone at the [WPO conference](#) seemed to relate to this speaker's theme of being stuck and--more important--becoming unstuck.

I was grateful that even though the speaker was a rigorous academic researcher, her clear delivery was laced with humor. Professor Rebecca Henderson, 45, is the real McCoy. Prior to her current spot at [Harvard Business School](#), she spent 11 years at MIT. After reading her bio, I was a bit fearful we would get facts, figures and charts. We did get all of these, but told in a way that had us all nodding our heads in agreement, laughing at the absurdity of it all and applauding enthusiastically at the end.

Henderson focused on overload at the organizational level. That means trying to do too many things or, put another way, being in firefighting mode all the time, and wondering why the heck so many fires are going on?

We listened intently for clues to help us get unstuck from our overload predicaments. Henderson reminded us that even though we all have very long organizational to-do lists, the bottom projects never get done. Never. Our nods and [smiles](#) affirmed that what she said was true.

Most people think that once a project gets on a to-do list, and once a project manager is assigned, the project will eventually get done. In reality, we are all fooling ourselves, even the project manager who thinks she is in charge of a viable project but really winds up spinning her wheels, and wasting company time and resources. The solution? Recognize this reality, and kill these low-on-the-list projects (jokingly referred to as [Project 26](#)) before they linger too long. Ah, sounds good--but easier said than done.

Henderson admitted she didn't have a "three-step magic bullet." Instead, she said it takes "courage, commitment and integrity" to lead a company with minimal overload.

She encouraged us to find the time to step back and make hard choices. Unfortunately, most projects are good--otherwise, why would they be on the list in the first place? Building a strong decision-making strategy will help determine which ones to keep on the list. Keeping good records from year to year will demonstrate exactly how much work a company can handle. The tendency to say "yes" to everything seems to be common at every size organization.

Much of the overload results because human beings are notoriously unreliable about estimating how long it takes to get things done. Henderson noted, "We lie to ourselves and to each other about how long it will take to get something done. Studies show that the only ones who are accurate in their estimates of how long it will take are the severely depressed."

I particularly liked Henderson's view that trust needs to be at the core of a company's ability to manage the overload problem. If trust exists between senior management and [employees](#), there can be a feeling that if problems exist, everyone can fix them together. This is quite the opposite of the "CYA" attitude promoted in many companies. Personally, I'll take trust over CYA any day--but so far, I'm still stuck. That pesky Project 26 refuses to go away.

Henderson says this problem isn't solved overnight--I guess patience is another leadership virtue.

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