



Jumping The Curve at Pepperdine University

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Introduction:

College and university executives are navigating an economic storm of unprecedented proportions. Three years ago saw the end of a fifteen year economic boom; a boom that encouraged parents to borrow money from their home equity to pay for their children's education. Today, this option is limited as home values have fallen in some states by twenty to thirty percent, and financial institutions are reluctant to lend money based on home equity.

Adding to this are dwindling state budgets. In Washington State, our governor has announced a budget that is significantly worse than previously thought – a budget that will require every governmental agency and department to eliminate an additional seven percent from their budget. Families with children in college and university are being told to brace themselves for “significant” tuition increases and for the average class size to increase from forty-five to seventy-five students.

How can a university or college executive navigate these turbulent waters and thrive versus survive?

THE PEPPERDINE CASE

How can you as a university or college executive navigate these turbulent waters and thrive versus survive? This question is at the heart of a partnership between my firm and Pepperdine University's Chief Information Officer and Vice Provost, Dr. Timothy Chester¹. We are investigating how a highly successful, technically superior central IT department can go from providing “good” value to providing “extraordinary value” while managing the constraints of the current economic environment.

The purpose of this paper is to share what we've learned about accomplishing strategic objectives during and in spite of an economic contraction. The work outlined here by no means describes every effort Dr. Chester has undertaken to navigate the financial crisis. This paper does shed light on a new prism



through which colleges and universities can view talent utilization, team performance, and employee engagement. As these three areas are attended to increased performance can be achieved.

Tim Chester has two goals:

1. To ensure that the students, faculty, and staff experience the central IT department as a strategic value added partner,
2. That his leadership team fosters growth and innovation while remaining good stewards of their financial resources.

Dr. Chester and I talked about the work he is undertaking to create a culture that embraces the concepts in Jim Collins book *Good to Great*. He wants to create an IT culture that is continuously striving for excellence. He knows that to succeed the impetus cannot come solely from him, but needs to be embedded in the entire culture. In short, Tim wants his team to be dissatisfied with being good, and instead believe in and strive for greatness.

Tim is committed to cultivating a new way of thinking about and responding to change throughout the IT department. To position for growth and the pursuit of greatness in a new way I shared with him a model called the S-Curve, sometimes also called the Growth Curve.

THE S-CURVE MODEL

Leaders in all industries report that understanding this model illuminates the cycles of growth and contraction in areas such as consumer electronics, software, textbooks, and even IT departments. They also report however that viewing team and organizational performance through the prism of the S-Curve provides them with two key benefits.

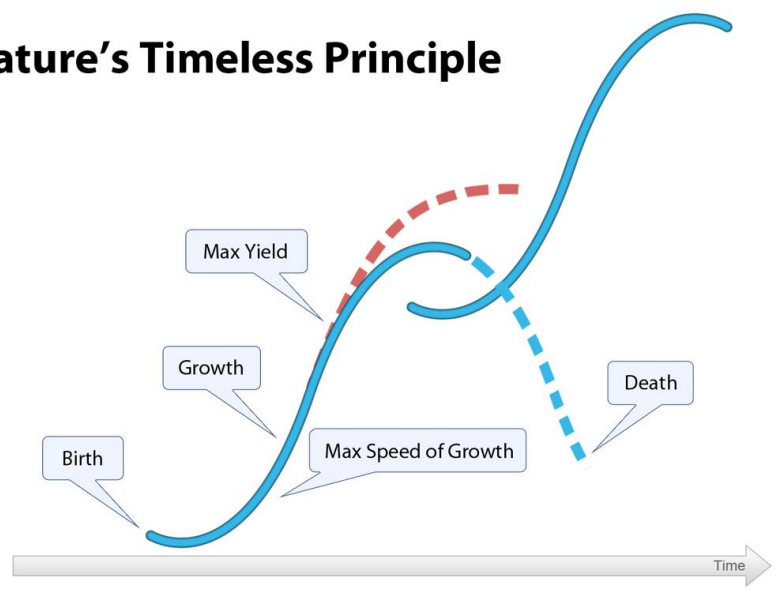


1. They're able to position change and growth in a positive manner which results in employees embracing change and growth versus rejecting it.
2. They're able to provide employees with a renewed sense of optimism for making the jump to higher levels of performance.

In my consulting practice the S-Curve model has become less about death and decay and more about growth and innovation for my clients. Without the understanding of this model, individuals, teams, and organizations are appreciably more comfortable with being good while great is a readily available option. Below is a graphic representation of the S-Curve.

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Nature's Timeless Principle



Growth follows a predictable pattern:

Exploration ▶ Execution ▶ Extinction
Acceleration ▶ Stabilization ▶ Deceleration

Creating sustainable growth means:

Delay extinction: stretch the curve
Avoid extinction: change the curve



Most leaders, when first viewing the S-Curve, immediately understand it intellectually but lack a framework for converting their theoretical understanding into a practical tool for organizational transformation. The key to leveraging the model is to first recognize that the process of birth, growth, and death is inevitable. Employees at every level of an organization have a predisposition to remain at the point marked by “maximum yield / profit.” With that understanding the S-Curve can become more than a nice theoretical construct, but rather a strategic model for leveraging the natural talents and skills of each team member.

Success becomes destructive when employees or teams arrive at the top of the S-Curve and become enamored with the rewards of their success.

At the top of every curve there can be found self-limiting patterns of behavior. Left unattended these patterns guarantee the death of an organization. That prompts the question – can success become destructive? Yes, success becomes destructive when employees or teams arrive at the top of the S-Curve and become enamored with the rewards of their success. They see success as something to be preserved versus something to be questioned, challenged, and reconfigured. This perspective, in very subtle ways allows teams to unknowingly put their energy into preserving their current success and to become anesthetized to change. They find it difficult if not impossible to turn their back on what’s made them successful.

JUMPING THE CURVE

Extraordinarily successful leaders and organizations question their assumptions about what’s next and *intentionally* and *continuously* talk about jumping to the next level of success. This is called “jumping the curve.” Jumping the curve requires redefining success and its traditional indicators. Within the context of jumping the curve, success signals the end of a project, product, or team’s lifecycle, and the beginning of a new cycle of birth and growth.



However, it is at the bottom of the S-Curve, characterized by risk and uncertainty, that successful leaders and organizations will feel uncomfortable. In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins said, “Greatness is not a function of circumstance. Greatness, it turns out, is largely a matter of conscious choice, and discipline”. Leaders who implement this S-Curve perspective achieve greater results for their department through increased employee engagement, skill utilization, and innovation.

First Steps

In October 2009 the Leadership Council of Pepperdine University’s IT department and I met to spend one day investigating the idea of moving from good to great, and the outlook for growth and innovation. The Leadership Council is a group of twenty IT professionals who serve for one year as a steering committee for strategic issues affecting the IT department. The group was interested in learning how to jump the curve and determined that jumping the curve wasn’t simply an intellectual construct, but is mandatory for remaining relevant to their key constituents. The day’s discussions centered on applying the concept of jumping the curve along with how to align the team’s strengths in ways that positively influence the department’s mission.

There are eight stepsⁱⁱ required to jump the curve. When asked to consider the eight steps, (shown in the chart below), the unanimous opinion of the Leadership Council was that they perform number three, “operate business,” exceptionally well and are most challenged by number seven, “anticipate and plan for the next curve.” This perspective provided significant insight into one of the first obstacles in going from good to great. When operational excellence is the end goal of any endeavor – innovation, growth, and transformation are compromised. True greatness embraces operational excellence as a

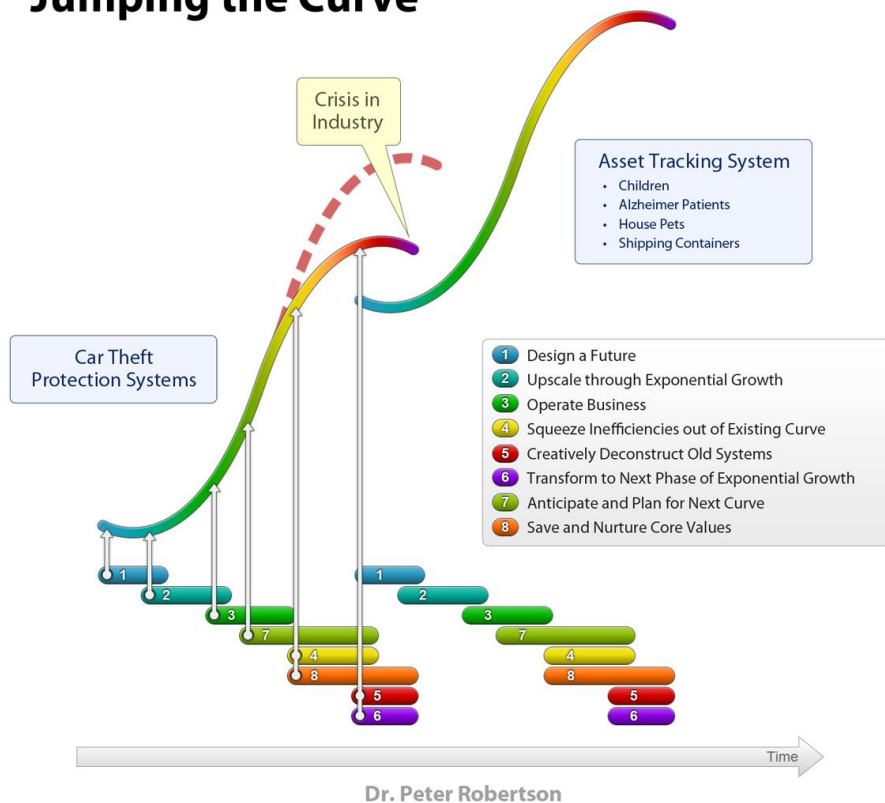
“Only the mediocre are always at their best.”

Jean Giraudoux



component of the cycle of growth and innovation and not as the whole cycle itself.

Jumping the Curve



Two initiatives emerged from this session. The first was to update the central IT department mission and purpose. The second was to identify each members talents and skills and their optimal position on the S-Curve.

In order to capitalize on the work completed in October and to accelerate the accomplishment of the IT Department’s strategic initiatives, we undertook the “Jumping the Curve” project. This project integrates the concepts of the S-Curve and how to fully maximize employee natural talents and skills.



The first stage of this project was to work individually with members of the Leadership Council debriefing an assessment called the AEM-Cube^{®iii}. The AEM-Cube identifies where on the S-Curve each team member can optimally contribute to the strategic goals of the Leadership Council, and shapes the development of the second stage of the project, which is to design Leadership Teams based on the S-Curve. Both stages sought to enhance the level of innovation and growth within the Leadership Council and the IT department as a whole.

Talent Utilization

A key component of this project was to determine the percentage of time members of the leadership council utilized their natural talents and skills as identified by the AEM-Cube. While the Leadership Council and IT in general are a truly high performing team, the goal was to determine if achieving the extraordinary with the same team was possible.

Based on an initial assessment it was determined that out of a possible 100%, the amount of time the overall team felt they were deploying their natural talents and skills was 37.5%. This is similar to driving your car with the parking brake on. The data confirmed what we knew - whenever employee's work in ways fully aligned with their natural talents and skills they produce greater results. This presents us with the opportunity to encourage higher performance with minimal intrusion into the department's current operations.

In order to reduce this excess energy expenditure and foster greater skill utilization we have implemented S-Curve Leadership Teams. These teams are designed to increase the Leadership Councils talent and skill utilization to above 60%.

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S-Curve Leadership Teams

It is well understood that all successful teams blend individuals with varying communication and thinking preferences. Some team members naturally tackle problems from an exploratory perspective. They look into an uncertain future and bring back to the present ideas rooted in the exploration of new ideas. They are invigorated by change, growth, and believe that greatness is rooted in an uncharted future. They are driven by the “possibility” of an idea and welcome thinking outside of the known and predictable.

Other team members tackle the same problem from a historical perspective. They value having facts, data and the historical perspective. They look for and find comfort in stability and predictability. Their preference is to look to the past and provide solutions that have been proven over time. They are driven by “probability” type thinking and welcome thinking inside the confines of best practices.

While jumping the curve requires a delicate balance of preserving the past with investigating the future – how a leader navigates this balancing act can determine success or failure. For example, one highly exploratory member of the Leadership Council recounted that when serving on a team with stability oriented team member’s, she felt the need to convince her fellow teammates of the value of her exploratory perspective. When she wasn’t successful in doing so she tried to embrace the stability-focused perspective. Neither worked. Her natural talent for future oriented thinking wasn’t recognized and valued so she became exasperated and mentally checked out of the process.

In order to counteract a team’s natural tendency to remain focused at the top of the S Curve (operating the department), and to cultivate a continuous process of growth and innovation, the following S-Curve Leadership Teams were created to achieve the following:



1. Maximize each member of the Leadership Council's natural talents and skills
2. Position each member of the Leadership Council effectively on S-Curve based on their AEM-cube® assessment
3. Accelerate innovation and growth regarding IT strategic Initiatives
4. Fully capture the leadership council's enthusiasm, engagement, and creative thinking.

The three teams are:

- The Innovative Leadership Team
- The Growth Leadership Team
- The Efficiency Leadership Team

Innovative Leadership Team

This team's focus is on innovation and new idea generation. Their first job is to explore **what's possible** without considering "how" to implement the idea. Members of this team are to venture outside of the known and explore new ways of providing greater value and to enhance the end user experience. After brainstorming as many ideas as possible, the team will vet their ideas internally, measure their value contribution, and determine which two or three ideas are worthy of being passed on to the Growth Leadership Team.

Growth Leadership Team

The Growth Leadership Team is the bridge between the Innovation and Efficiency Leadership Team. Their responsibility is to focus on the "what's and how's" of ideas ready for implementation. This phase of the S-Curve is focused on accelerating the **deployment and growth** of ideas. Members of this team execute ideas provided by the Innovation Leadership Team, and manage the



process to maturation. At which point the process is handed off to the Efficiency Leadership Team.

Efficiency Leadership Team

The Efficiency Leadership Team is responsible for eliminating inefficiencies from all processes within Central IT. They are solely focused on maintaining and elongating the life cycle of a particular process's time on the S-Curve. They are the final link before a process or procedure is replaced or reinvented. This phase of the S-Curve is fully focused on refining the "how" of processes. All teams have a direct linkage to the strategic initiatives of Central IT.

What this means to teams

Whenever individuals, teams or organizations feel they're doing good enough and striving to improve is something to be considered next quarter, that is a sign that mediocrity has quietly taken root in the hearts and minds of the people working there. They've convinced themselves that past successes will continue, and that what's required is to tweak the current way of doing things. Adversity, when experienced by this type of culture can be overwhelming and debilitating. With successful leadership however, adversity becomes a natural part of the growth curve and brings out the best in individuals, leaders, and teams.

What this means to higher education executives

To manage the S-Curve well change cannot be something solely happening to a leaders team. The comprehensive change Tim wants will also require changes in how he will lead his team. Tim has to jump a curve in his leadership, which requires being crystal clear as to what greatness means to him personally and professionally.

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It is a courageous act for Dr. Chester to intentionally transform his department from providing “good” value to providing “extraordinary value”. Implementing strategies that allow him to do so is part of our continuing work throughout 2011.

Hugh Blane is President of Claris Consulting. He is a nationally recognized business strategist hired to help organizations solve challenging business issues, strengthen personal and professional relationships, and execute on strategic initiatives with greater effectiveness. A subject-matter expert in leadership, team performance, and influence, Hugh Blane is a senior-level consultant who has worked with thousands of people in a wide variety of organizations including Pepperdine and Stanford University, the University of Washington, Microsoft, Starbucks, Spacelabs Medical, KPMG and Costco.

ⁱ Dr. Chester joined Pepperdine University two and a half years ago and has spent much of his time enhancing the service, leadership, and technological infrastructure in order to fulfill the University’s mission. Tim is a dynamic and passionate leader whose leadership is best described as “can do” and “let’s get it done”. Once an idea for improving the end user’s experience is articulated, the accomplishment is all but certain.

ⁱⁱ Dr. Peter Robertson identified and developed the eight steps for Jumping The Curve.

ⁱⁱⁱ The AEM Cube is one of the many assessments we use to enable organizations to think strategically.