

Video Transcript Huggy Rao Friction

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By Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 00:14

Let me begin by addressing the first question as to why Bob Sutton and I chose to write the book titled, The Friction Project, how smart leaders make the right things easier and the wrong things harder.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 00:30

Earlier, Bob and I had written a book called Scaling Up Excellence. And we're deeply touched that the book did well. Through a fluke, it did become a Wall Street Journal bestseller. But what we discerned and discovered was when we shared the message, top executives and senior executives loved the message and the methods. But as we went lower down the organization what we found was, people appreciated the message but lamented that it was so hard to get anything done.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 01:03

Let me give our readers two sort of bookends of examples for them to understand why we wrote the book. In one executive education class that I was teaching at Stanford, I asked an executive, "Where do you work?" And he replied, with a mischievous grin, "I work in a frustration factory." I was taken aback. I thought to myself, "Oh, my God, how can anybody go to work and work in a frustration factory?" And the other extreme bookend, there was this young lady, and I recall her very vividly, and she even had a quiver in her voice. And she said, "Professor Rao, I pour myself into doing inconsequential things at work, I'm exhausted. And when I go home, I am nothing more than the scraps of myself for my family." That really hit me in the solar plexus, as it did Bob. And we said, we really need to understand why is it so hard to get things done!

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 02:08

And part of what we kind of discovered was that in many companies, the right things become super hard to do. And the wrong things, tragically, become easier to do. And our point was that perhaps leaders need to reverse that sharply, make the right things easier to do, and the wrong things harder.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 02:34

Let me turn to the second question, "How do they do that?" And our starting point is time is the most precious resource in any company. And we argue in our book that great leaders who are friction fixers see themselves as trustees of other people's stuff. They don't want to waste other people's time. So what do they do? They actually look back and say, "Can we actually see what are the obstacles in our organization?" And friction means upstream.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 03:17

Now, just as we have good bacteria and bad bacteria, we have good friction and bad friction, good obstacles and bad obstacles. What are bad obstacles? We just have a forthcoming Harvard Business Review article titled, "Rid your organization of obstacles that infuriate people." That's exactly what bad friction is. Bad friction consists of obstacles that infuriate people and really that make it hard for employees to choose a more curious and generous version of themselves. As one executive put it, "I'm swimming in a sea of crap. "How can I," he said, show initiative and generosity?" So a lot of it is taking out bad friction, taking out obstacles that infuriate people.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 04:19

On the other side, leaders also need to insert what kinds of obstacles? Obstacles that slow people down, that educate them that open their minds, and make sure that employees don't choose an overconfident, myopic, and biased version of themselves. That really is the job of leadership.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 04:44

Let me now turn to the third question. "Can we think of tactics for eliminating bad friction? And can we think of tactics for instituting good friction?" I'll just give a quick example of each.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 05:00

Let's begin with bad friction first. If you're a trustee of other people's time, and if you're a friction fixer, you actually spend time mowing the lawn to do what? To get rid of obstacles that, infuriate. Most people think that getting rid of obstacles that infuriate is like a one-and-done project. It's not. It's like mowing the lawn. How often do we mow the lawn? I would hope we do that regularly. So the tragedy is organizations don't know that. And there are many, many ways to do it.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 05:42

One simple technique, which was used by one of the people we describe in our book, Melinda Ashton, a doctor. She is in a hospital, Hawaii Pacific. And she came up with a super simple idea called, "Let's get rid of stupid stuff." And she got 188 suggestions. And they saved a lot of time. In fact, they found that reducing one click by one nurse, when many nurses were involved, together, they were able to when they accumulated all of this data, they were able to save 1,700 hours, and so that those are techniques to reduce bad friction.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 06:27

What about techniques to institute good friction? Let me give you one striking example. In the city of Oakland, California, cops in 2018 or 19 stopped 31,000 vehicles. Many of them were stops that had African American and Latino drivers who didn't need to be stopped. The question was, how do we reduce the number of those needless stops?

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 06:57

My wonderful colleague Jennifer Eberhardt came up with an idea: Why don't we put in friction by adding a question that cops needed to answer? What's the question? It turns out that if you're a cop in Oakland and you stop a vehicle, you got to fill out a form. There are three yes-no questions to them. Jennifer added a fourth question. And the fourth question was, "Do you have prior intelligence connecting this vehicle to a prior crime, yes or no?" If he has stopped if no, let it go. And of course,

cops would always do a dry run of how they were going to fill in the form before they, you know, stopped vehicle. And she found that adding that question alone, reduced traffic stops by 31%. Even though far fewer people were stopped, people felt safe. Predictably, far fewer African Americans and Latinos were stopped. So there we have it. Putting in good friction consists of putting pauses, as Jennifer did. Stop signs, traffic lights, speed bumps, and the like. And we discuss all of these in our book.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 08:13

So what's really the takeaway? The takeaway is: Let's give the gift of time to our employees so that they have time to be curious and generous. And most of all, they're not taking scraps of themselves. Let's at the same time institute obstacles that actually prevent people from being overconfident and generous. That really is being a friction fixer and for us, all leaders are friction fixers.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 08:50

And let me close with a couple of examples of where we need to put in good friction. Where do we need to put in good friction? When you're making a big, one-way-door decision, costly to reverse the decision, hiring a senior person being a case in point. When you're doing creative work, creative work requires friction when there is complex. So these are three conditions, for example, where we really need to think of putting in good friction in the organization: when the cost of failure is low, when you're doing routine work, when the work is relatively simple.

Hayagreeva "Huggy" Rao, Ph.D. 09:35

Let's take out bad friction. That really is the message of the book. And so when you take bad friction out, hopefully the right things become easier when you put good friction in hopefully, the wrong things become harder. And that really is the essence of being a leader and the friction fix. Thank you so very much.