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Meet the MasterMinds: Get *Unstuck* with Keith Yamashita

You haven't truly lived the life of a consultant until you experience the sheer terror of being hopelessly stuck. After all, we're the ones with all the solutions, right?

Now when you're stuck in the muck and are not sure how to get out, there's help. Get your hands on a copy of ***UNSTUCK*** by consultants Keith Yamashita and Sandra Spataro. The book is a practical, accessible toolkit that will help your project team break through mental gridlock.

In this interview, Yamashita shares some of his best thinking on why teams get stuck and what to do about it.

MCNews: What led you to write a book about getting 'unstuck'?

Yamashita: I think the economic downturn over the past three years has caused a strange phenomenon in business: I'm seeing more stuck leaders, stuck teams, and stuck businesses than ever before. In an era of tighter budgets, riskier ventures, and changing market dynamics, more and more people seem unable to move forward to achieve their goals.

I've noticed that upper management looks down through the organization, saying, I could do something if my people were more capable. Middle managers look upward, blaming senior management for not being decisive enough. And individual contributors throughout the company blame their colleagues for the poor performance of their teams.

The point being, virtually no one in organizations wants to take accountability for the lack of progress. Professor Sandra Spataro and I wrote ***UNSTUCK*** because we felt an in-the-moment tool for leaders might inspire them to take more accountability for the health of their organizations.

By no means do we think that ***UNSTUCK*** is a be-all-end-all guide, but rather, it's an easy way to get back on the road to success.

MCNews: How do you know whether you're really stuck or just on the verge of a breakthrough?

Yamashita: While there are lots of analytic ways to determine whether you're stuck, I think the most telling come from trusting your gut. What thoughts come to mind when you answer the question, "How are you doing—really?"

Through work with large, complex client organizations such as HP, Nike, PBS, IBM, Gap Inc, and others, I've found powerful insights within the answer to that question. Do you feel overwhelmed? Exhausted? Directionless? Hopeless? Battle-torn? Worthless? Alone? These symptoms are what I call The Serious Seven—the seven most common indicators that you're stuck.

If you're feeling one of these emotions, it's likely you—or your organization—is stuck. I think one of the most interesting observations we gleaned from studying stuck teams is that successful teams are often the ones that get stuck most often. And ambitious teams get stuck all the time. The difference between failure and breakthrough is perseverance.

MCNews: As an outside observer, what do you see that immediately lets you know a person or a project is stuck?

Yamashita: I try to examine the condition of their system: Do they have a strong and vibrant purpose? Do they have a clear strategy on how to deliver on that purpose—every day? Do they have a clear structure and clear processes to deliver on that strategy? How are their people and interaction skills? Does their culture knit all of these other elements of the system together?

Organizations get stuck when one or more elements of their system is out of alignment—if they have a clear purpose, but no structure and process, people spend all their time feeling directionless. If they have a clear structure and process, but no purpose, people often end up feeling alone.

The same is true for individuals: when the elements of your personal system are out of alignment, that's when you're most susceptible to getting stuck. Of course, the point here is not just what causes people to get stuck, but what you can do about getting unstuck. Leadership is about getting your team unstuck—through the work you do every day.

MCNews: It's often difficult for a team, in a collective sense, to agree that it is stuck. What works best to help a team face and acknowledge that?

Yamashita: Actually, I find that most individuals know they're stuck. The problem is more that the term "stuck" is pejorative, and people won't admit that out loud. We try to get teams to see that being stuck is merely a stop on the path to success. It's not a bad thing; it is a condition.

So the key is to give people a way to say that they're stuck. In our book, we suggest many ideas on how to do that.

One that I use in my practice is an exercise I call give/get. You gather the key members of a team that is working together on a process and you give them each 3 by 5 cards. You start by asking, in order for you to "give" your best performance, what must you "get" from others around this table? The first team member starts, recording his "give" (what he will produce) and asking for a "get" from those who owe him something (they, in turn, write down what they will give him)...and then those team members, ask for their "get" from others...and so on. It's a very quick and easy way to map what's not functioning in the group, and why they are stuck.

MCNews: For many projects, the career success of the team members and the project sponsor can be on the line, making it difficult to communicate honestly about being stuck. Any advice for helping teams communicate with others in the organization about the problems they face?

Yamashita: The first thing we help teams realize is that it's because career success is on the line, that you **have** to communicate honestly and openly about being stuck. We get people to see that being open and honest is really the first step in truly connecting with their colleagues.

Openness and honesty in American business is often thought of as a method of criticism or critique. I see it differently. Done right, it should really be about sharing the same experience—in pursuing a worthy goal, or in the case of your question, confronting a common fear. It's this ability to share the same experience that makes groups strong and capable.

MCNews: Many times, consultants *begin* projects in the “stuck” position. They may lack company knowledge, client relationships and an understanding of the culture. How do you get a project in gear when faced with that situation?

Yamashita: I think it's less about method and more about mindset. I find that the best consultants are systems-thinkers—that is, they see their projects in relationship to the entire systems of the organizations they are trying to help. It's not just about solving a pricing issue, when the entire product-development cycle is off-kilter. Or, it's not just a marketing problem, when a misaligned corporate culture is causing poor customer satisfaction.

It takes a special kind of mind to be willing to explore challenges in the system far outside of the given assignment. And, obviously, as a consultant, you're not really getting paid to examine the issues more widely. But I find that consultants who see the whole system—purpose, strategy, structure + process, metrics + rewards, people + interactions, culture (at least, this is how we define the whole system)—seem to make better progress in the long run.

MCNews: Company politics contribute to some projects getting stuck. Is some amount of organization politics good for a project?

Yamashita: I don't know about "good" versus "bad," but I can say that when you have more than one person on a project, you're going to get politics. Often politics is caused by a difference in background or point of view. And both, I'd say, can be harnessed for the good of projects. So in that sense, politics isn't necessarily a sign that you're doomed.

MCNews: What's your favored method for generating ideas to get a project unstuck?

Yamashita: I have so many favorites, it's hard to say. One thing I encourage leaders to do is make the process of getting unstuck an integral part of daily business, rather than let all the turmoil pile up.

There are lots of preemptive measures leaders can take to avoid getting stuck, and perhaps, more important, recover more quickly when they do get stuck. One idea: Open every meeting with an exercise that helps your team align with the system in which you do your work. Write a headline from the future to ensure you're on track with your purpose.

Repeat the tenets of your strategy. Take on just one aspect of making your team's structure or processes more effective. We give dozens of examples of exercises in our book. We find that getting unstuck doesn't have to be some big, bold act; it can also be something that leaders do every single day.

MCNews: And, how do you know when you've reached the state of being unstuck?

Yamashita: This answer is easy: You are unstuck when you're able to move forward to achieve your goal.

MCNews: What's on your reading list these days?

Yamashita: I've been obsessing about the classics recently: Jim Collins' earlier works and Jerry Porras' articles. Two recent discoveries worth mentioning: Professor Edward Tufte's work on information design (the visualization of complex issues) and Christopher Alexander's writings on systems thinking. He's an architect who finds patterns in virtually everything.

MCNews: Thanks for your time.

You can find out more about Yamashita, his book and services at www.unstuck.com and <http://www.stoneyamashita.com>.