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Feldenkrais: The slow road to success in the fast lane

By [Lynette Chiang](#)

I just attended an introductory workshop on the [Feldenkrais Method](#) [1].

The movements are slow. Very slow. In fact, in a typical "lesson", you move a limb just the tiniest amount, maybe an inch or less, then move it back. Then compare how your body feels fore and aft.

It's customary to lie on a bit of thin padding, because we tend to flinch and stiffen up when we lie on a hard floor.

But, by the end of the lesson, you're amazed – you can roll about like a ball of goop on the hard floor. Like a rubbery baby, with no 'ooooffs' or 'yeowchs'. You move with grace and purpose, like a seasoned performer or virtually any member of the animal kingdom who is not thinking moment to moment, "how am I looking?"

What's this got to do with Fast Company?

It's the antithesis: there's no success without failure, there's no dark without out light, there's no sound without silence, and there's no going fast without going slow.

"No one can learn when hurried or hustled," said Moshe Feldenkrais (1904-1984), a pioneering physicist, engineer, biomechanicist and black belt in judo. His sublimely cogent essay, "Learn to Learn", explains his "Awareness Through Movement" philosophy:

"Efficient movement or performance of any sort is achieved by weeding out, and eliminating parasitic superfluous exertion. The superfluous is as bad as the insufficient, only it costs more. When becomes familiar with an act, speed increases spontaneously, and so does power. This not so obvious, as it is correct."

Ever watched a powerpoint presentation with too much stuff on the slides and you didn't get it or glazed over?

Listened to a speaker who said way too much and you didn't get it or glazed over?

Explained something to someone in too many words and they didn't get it and glazed over?

Not to mention spending a lot of energy worrying about the outcome of something that you couldn't influence anyway?

The Feldenkrais approach is about recalibrating our body awareness, by going back to age 0 and re-learning how to move, so we can be more effective in all our decisions, conscious and unconscious.

Some other soundbites – or rather, slow nibbles:

The countenance of trying hard betrays the inner conviction of being unable, or of not being good enough. Thus, do not "try" to do well.

An act becomes nice when we do nothing but the act. Everything we do over and above that, or short of it, destroys harmony. Thus, do not "try" to do nicely.

Or as Yoda said: Do not try. Do.

Rather than plagiarize more of his essay, read it yourself here:

<http://www.feldenkrais-wien.at/article-1.htm> [2]

I recently became a certified yoga teacher. During my training I rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed, overthinking my class until I could run it start to finish so clearly in my mind. When I got up to "perform", something slipped my mind half way and it all vanished, and I froze, full of angst, a sense of failure, and no room to let my subconscious "Just Wing It."

Do not concentrate. Rather, attend well to the entire situation, your body, your surroundings, by scanning the whole sufficiently to become aware of any change or difference, concentrating just enough to perceive it.

I needed Feldenkrais!

An example of this from bicycling: **drafting** is the technique of riding in the slipstream of the cyclist in front of you - 'sucking wheel' as it's called. Concentrate too hard on that rear wheel and you're bound to run into it - with disastrous results. The idea is to take in the scene before you as a whole, softening your gaze, letting the that rear wheel being a fuzzy detail.

I came into contact with this method over 20 years ago in Australia, while taking an acapella singing class. (In New York, the [Feldenkrais Institute](#) [3] is only 3 years young). Despite the joke that Australia is "the 51st state of 'merica", that big sandy island is surprisingly quick to adopt cutting edge ideas from Europe; I had Lasik downunder 20 years ago, where it had already been going for ten years prior. Now there's an example of inefficient writing and superfluous exertion – delete everything in this paragraph after "class".

Feldenkrais is a popular training tool for performers of all kinds – dancers, singers, musicians, athletes - where success is all about "flow" – a harmonious, effortless and movement-efficient performance. Anything less leads to mistakes, left feet, sweat on the keyboard and missed slam dunks.

"Psychology is a relatively young field," said our instructor David Zemach-Bersin, a physiological

psychologist and long time understudy of the man himself. "Physicists were so excited at their new theories being able to explain the physical world, they thought they'd apply it to humans too to explain how we tick."

He reminded us why animals are born in an advanced state of physical development compared to humans - their lives revolve around movement rather than intellect thought. Within an hour of birth they're a fully functioning, barely wobbly member of their society. In contrast, the human head develops so much faster than the physical body, that we have to be born early else we'd be too big to pop out. Thus, our motor system takes a back seat to our intellect and we go through life hunched over, stumbling around, and getting lumbago and stiff necks, making excessive and misdirected movements and as a result, inefficient decisions in life, according to Feldenkrais. The solution? Go back and "re-learn" to "flow" like the wild things. Hence going back to moving that finger an inch at a time ...

A corollary to this notion is "the law of the least amount of effort to make a noticeable result", said Zemach-Bersin. This is best illustrated using an example of physical weight: If you're carrying a fridge on your back, adding or removing a sachet of ketchup from your last take-out is hardly detectable. Research has determined that that weight needs to be at least 1/40 of the weight of the fridge for the average human to detect the difference. You'd need a lot of stolen ketchup piled in the crispier before you'd notice the difference! Now make that fridge was just a few ounces, balanced on a finger. A few goops from that sachet would tip the balance. In our lives, 'bigger-brighter-better-more' means that everything gets thrown into overdrive to make a difference. Do you hate the way ads are broadcast louder than an already loud TV? That's escalation.

An example of escalation from my world of bicycling: one blinky red light in the black of night is visible enough, but due to our landfilling-lust for bigger-better-brighter-more, bicycle rear lights have escalated, featuring more and more globes, and higher and higher intensities. Add that to the siimilarly escalating read lights festooning all kinds of vehicles (remember those lit up 'spoilers'?) and the resultant visual cacophony of light means I'm lucky if I don't get run over at night. No wonder my [staying alive device](#) [4] is proving quite popular.

An example using sound: if everyone would speak at a slightly lower level in a restaurant, everyone could be heard while still retaining a buzzy ambienc. But note how the TV or volume is jacked up, the hard noise reflective surfaces, the noise level rising so you have to scream, "pass the edamame!" - it's a strain on everyone. It amazes me how architects and interior designers continue to neglect this aspect of restaurant design, claiming that "the people want there to be a buzz." Do they really? A buzz or a din?

Then there's escalation of information - showing and telling too much. In the words of famous Sao Paulo Creative Director Marcelo Serpa, "The more you say, the less people hear" or, "Say too much, you lose money." I get this feeling when I see overloaded webpages (like my own, because it's just my content coolroom with the door left wide open at moment) or listen to certain loquacious CNN newsreaders - I just want to switch them off.

And what about Sex In The City Look-and-Soundalikes wallpapering cable TV? What a relief to the optic nerve when someone dowdy or dumpy comes on! No wonder Susan Boyle made headlines. No wonder we like British drama and its hallmark brilliant casting.

So the faster and harder we exert ourselves, the more we escalate, the less sensitive we are to subtle changes, and the harder we have to work to make a difference.

Try this as an exercise. Pick a 'mindless' activity, like reaching for a cookie jar or cleaning your teeth, and fully commit to it. Concentrate on precisely what movement is needed, no more, and no less. "When you commit to reaching for a cookie jar, ideally your whole body commits," says Zemach-Bersin. "So your right arm shoots up, the right side of your body stretches, and simultaneously your the left shoulder and left side of the body angle down. You put weight on the right foot and release weight from the left. Your head and eyes look up to where your hand and fingers are reaching.. You inhale." By being rushed and preoccupied, you may semi-commit, turning of the faucet at the same time and worrying about the time and end up straining a muscle or dropping the jar. One of the most common problems in a car is wrenching your upper body around from the drivers seat to reach for something in the back seat.

Now approach a task similarly. Answer one email at a time, breathe, drop the shoulders, and resist the urge to have several half-baked email and application windows open at once with incomplete eBay transactions and credit card lookups and what have you. Allow yourself to fully commit to small tasks and notice how effortlessly they flow from one to the next. Breathe!

By reducing the urge to achieve, and attending also to the means for achieving, we learn easier. On knowing what to achieve before we have learned to learn, we can reach only the limit of our ignorance.

Feldenkrais, like Vipassana [5] meditation, Avatar and other mind-body techniques is a way to re-calibrate that internal escalator back to a time when our heads weren't too big for our bodies. Suspend your cynicism and check them out with an open mind – shifting out of the fast lane into the slow lane periodically can help us avoid a breakdown up ahead.

The Galfromdownunder [6] believes bicycling is a very good way to get somewhere fast yet slow enough to save money, time and the planet. Check out her latest video escapades in NYC [7].

Picture: What was life like back in the womb, before your head got too big for your body, and you burst into the fast lane and hit "hyperdrive"?

Links:

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Feldenkrais_Method

[2] <http://www.feldenkrais-wien.at/article-1.htm>

[3] <http://www.feldenkraisinstitute.com/>

[4] <http://www.galfromdownunder.com/tcb>

[5] <http://www.dhamma.org/>

[6] <http://www.galfromdownunder.com/>

[7] <http://www.bikefriday.com/tikitontrial>