



# Exiting a Rut

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Focus forward on the road ahead





When I was a child, my younger brother had a pet hamster, whom he appropriately named El Destructo, until he learned that the hamster's gender was female, and he subsequently changed the hamster's name to Ella Destructo. Ella routinely escaped from her surroundings, and at times, she created havoc for which she was aptly named. During one of her getaways, she invaded my Barbie dollhouse and bit off a portion of my Stephanie doll's high heel foot. Stephanie was the brunette version of the blonde Barbie. My parents, in an attempt to locate a Barbie doll that better resembled their dark-haired daughter during era well before the American Girl doll, were elated to find a doll that more closely physically resembled me. The Stephanie doll was a gift from my parents one Christmas.

Another time, Ella fell down a cold air return in our family's house built at the turn of the last century. My father spent the better portion of a day attempting to identify Ella's specific location after she fell and was forced to rescue her by dismantling the massive HVAC pipes. Like most domesticated rodents, Ella had a wheel in her habitat, and she vigorously exercised on the wheel several times a day. During these exertions, her high energy was expended going round and round on the wheel to nowhere, reminiscent of the cliché about those people who are stuck on the treadmill of life.

### What is a rut and what are the signs of being in a rut?

Definitionally, the word "rut" has three meanings. For those industry professionals familiar with roads and pathways, one definition is "a track worn by a wheel or habitual passage." Another less common definition is the amorous period prior to mating in which certain male species, like elk and deer, engage. Although this definition could easily be the subject of some colorful discussion, I will refrain from doing so here. The pertinent definition for this article is "a monotonous routine." Leaders often get stuck in monotonous routines and/or have painfully observed their team members doing so. They travel from home to work and work to home on the same route every day. Lunch is eaten at the same establishment, and the same meal is ordered from the menu every day. They engage in the same activities day after day, and one day seems indistinguishable from another.

Aside from being caught in a tedious routine, other warning signs that leaders are stuck in a rut exist. In Forbes "3 Signs You're in a Leadership Rut," contributor Elizabeth Freedman identifies three specific areas that demonstrate a leader is in a rut: 1) there is nothing on the leader's calendar to which he or she can look forward, 2) they do the same thing all the time and 3) the leader has ceased to dream boldly. International Institute for Management Development Professor Ginka Toegel, in her article "Don't Fall into a Leadership Rut" on [imd.org](http://imd.org), recognizes other signs of leadership being caught in a rut. Leadership's failure to continue learning and isolating themselves from others at different levels of their companies and outside their organizations can be telltale signs of a rut. Isolation stifles critical feedback from others in and outside a leader's company and from other generations.



A leader can easily be lulled into a rut through the need to address the pressing crisis du jour, which deprives a leader of the ability to be forward thinking, and by the belief that if what has been done in the past has been successful, it should be duplicated in the future. However, leadership's lack of awareness about being in a rut can be devastating to an organization. Freedman notes the dangers created when leaders are snagged in a rut. "Left unchecked, company innovation and performance and morale may drop, and good talent leaves."

### Ways to banish a rut

It takes conscious thought and planning to banish a rut. One way is to break out of isolation in and outside of your organization. The television series "Undercover Boss" exemplifies the significance of doing so and the valuable, albeit sometimes harsh, feedback that those working at different levels of a company can provide. Not only is it comical to watch an undercover CEO who has a Wharton School of Business MBA struggle with competently managing a drive-through order at a fast food restaurant or maneuver a forklift in a warehouse, the show's viewers witness the epiphanic moments when the bosses gain understanding and compassion for the contributions and concerns of their employees with whom they have virtually no previous contact.

A sage leader should never stop learning. Aside from the knowledge that others in and outside your organization can impart, learning can include attending classes or programs in areas that are different than those in which you typically participate. Additionally, leaders can pursue another degree or a professional designation, like the SR/WA, to enrich their knowledge. As one who has been in the right of industry as an attorney for almost three and one half decades, I am pursuing my SR/WA and have learned things about eminent domain law that I did not know before. Contrary to the saying, an old dog can be taught new tricks.

Other ways to extinguish a rut are to take control of your calendar and plan to shake it up. Although leaders often relinquish control of their schedules, they are ultimately in charge, and their calendars do not need to be replete with activities that cause dismay. Freedman advises, "As good as you are, you'll be even better if you have days to look forward to and a calendar that energizes you, so commit to making small improvements in your calendar (more bright spots and fewer meetings you dread), and you'll yield instant results." A leader can shake it up by engaging in new activities on a regular basis, particularly those that are "a stretch for you," as Freedman suggests. The athletic apparel company Lululemon had a saying on its shopping bags about reaching outside one's comfort zone: "Do one thing a day that scares you." When you move outside your pre-established boundaries, incredible growth occurs. What was once scary, or even terrifying, one day is no longer after a leader has conquered the fear.

It is not a coincidence that the theme for IRWA's 70th Annual International Education Conference in Long Beach, California, is incorporated in the subtitle of this article. Rather, it is an attempt to be quippy about a topic that has recently been a significant concern to me. Unfortunately, lately, I have observed both leaders and team members trapped in ruts. It seems that the current state of the right of way industry, in which fewer professionals are available to handle increased workloads, has caused us to be oblivious to breaking free of ruts that restrain us.

Personally, having something to which I can look forward extinguishes a rut for me, and IRWA provides that opportunity with the Annual International Education Conference. Yes, I am making a shameless, but enthusiastic, plug to encourage IRWA members to attend this year's conference in Long Beach, California. The Annual International Education Conference checks all the boxes for rut banishment. It's an occasion to which you can look forward and promises engagement with others in the right of way industry from your and other professionals all over the country and other parts of the world, across generational lines. Such engagement builds camaraderie. Additionally, if you attend the Annual International Education Conference, you have the opportunity to partake in numerous education sessions led by seasoned experts on an array of contemporary industry topics. The conference also includes several exciting evening events.

Irrespective of whether you are in a leadership rut, I hope that you attend this year's Annual International Education Conference in Long Beach, and I look forward to seeing you there. ✪



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