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The Zen Actuary Installment 6: “Letting Go of Self-Importance”

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Author's Note: This is the continuation of a series¹ adapted from the book *Awake at Work* by Michael Carroll, covering the application of Buddhist teachings to situations encountered in a modern corporate workplace setting. This series addresses challenges frequently encountered by practicing actuaries.

This installment and the next will focus on detachment.

The actuarial profession consists of highly intelligent and ethically strong individuals who contribute to public well-being through the effective and efficient design and management of financial security programs, products and services. The many diverse challenges that the typical actuary faces are intellectually stimulating and emotionally satisfying when completed. Actuaries rightfully take great pride in their work and—consciously or unconsciously—derive a significant amount of their ego and self-esteem from their careers. This is all quite normal from a human perspective. Most people want to feel good about what they do and that their talents and energies are being well utilized.

Actuaries tend to have this self-belief further reinforced by many of their co-workers—actuaries and non-actuaries alike:

- In insurance companies, actuaries are considered the engineers of the organization, with many of them holding leadership positions to navigate risk-taking and strategic decisions.
- Regulators look to actuaries to ensure the financial soundness of the institutions they manage and place a high set of expectations on the work that they produce to follow through on that.
- Consulting actuaries are in strong demand and command a high hourly rate for their services. It's almost impossible not to get at least somewhat of a swelled head about all this, no matter how well-grounded an individual actuary may be.

But the harsh truth for everyone, even for each of us dedicated professionals, is that we are all replaceable. There are times I personally find that hard to believe for myself, particularly after delivering a strong board presentation, or knocking out yet another insightful memo demonstrating my alpha actuary pedigree. But when I sit down and think about all of this in a quiet moment, I realize that there are others—probably many, perhaps even more than I'd like to think—who can successfully execute my responsibilities. This is especially true when factoring in an appropriate amount of transition time and opportunity to climb the learning curve.

On the surface, this seems like a massive downer. Should I even bother going to work tomorrow? Hey, my employer will find someone to replace me anyway. Let's retire now and hit the links early. Oh yeah, I still have bills to pay and a retirement to fund. I guess I'd better set the alarm for my normal time anyway. Maybe no one else has figured out that I'm replaceable anyway.



But where is the joy and wisdom of recognizing that someone else could design that product, or build that risk model, or analyze that reserve change, or complete that rate filing? How can each of us feel good knowing that the world will most likely not stop turning if we could no longer be the high-powered risk management professional we've come to know and love?

First off, being replaceable does not equate to being useless. Knowing that someone else can do my job does not mean that I'm not doing my job well and adding value to my employer or client. It is simply a reminder that I need to keep performing well and continue to grow professionally because my employer or client always has the option to turn elsewhere if I don't. This is nothing new. It is implicit in the employment contract or consulting engagement. None of us has guaranteed job security no matter how long we have performed well for a particular client or employer. Contemplating that someone else can do my job further grounds me in this truth.

Furthermore, I feel gratitude for this realization. I know that I cannot take anything for granted and need to continually find new ways to add value and be a better professional. This forces me to regularly evaluate how I'm performing and where there are opportunities for me to learn and grow.

Admittedly, this may be easier for someone who works in a generalist role (as I do) than for someone specializing in a particular product line or actuarial specialty such as pricing. But I think even for specialists, there are different perspectives that one can take to one's work, and real value in occasionally venturing outside one's comfort zone:

- How can predictive modeling help refine the assumptions used in pricing?
- How can lessons learned from a product line with a checkered past be used to re-design a version that is a winning proposition for both the insurance company and the end consumer?
- Are there techniques in measuring and managing operational risk that can be applied to other types of risk?

I've been in the profession for almost 30 years, and I am amazed at how the depth and breadth of actuarial work have evolved while maintaining its core principles. Trying to keep up with industry and professional developments can be overwhelming at times, but the richness of experience that results from doing so is priceless.

Awareness of being replaceable also helps to keep my ego in check. I am thankful that others value my abilities and counsel, rather than taking their inquiries for granted or as a burden that I must endure. I view senior management and board meetings as special opportunities to reshape the company rather than as another obligation to fulfill. Potential new assignments and responsibilities are viewed as intriguing possibilities, subject to the reality check of time and resources. I know my current position is only temporary, and the nature of it is changing all the time. So I need to give it my best effort and take as big a swing as I can. If I am not willing to do that, then someone else should be in my chair.

Finally, the realization that someone else can do my job can be comforting. Knowing that another would fill my shoes if I were no longer willing or able to do my job relieves the stress and burden of worrying about succession planning. This is not to say that we should not do such planning. Rather it further strengthens the case for doing so as it is simply good risk management for any organization. Actuaries are experts in contingency planning, and having solid actuarial bench strength appropriately addresses the contingency of losing valued actuarial talent. Not doing so means a longer temporary vacuum when such talent is lost, and the consequences associated with that vacuum.

An associated side benefit of maintaining a strong bench is the knowledge that one can take that long vacation to a prized destination and be secure that things will not fall apart back at the office. This allows each of us that precious time to live beyond work and lowers the risk of burnout. This helps one maintain that sense of work/life balance we all speak about but often struggle to maintain with our busy schedules and work demands.

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We keep moving forward with the inner confidence in our abilities and trust in our intuition to continue to use them in the best way we know how.

In coming to terms with the knowledge that we are all replaceable, we need to take some time to carefully examine what is going on in our minds as we contemplate this truth. What we will likely encounter is our attachment to our current situation, no matter how we may feel about it—good, bad or indifferent. For most of us as actuaries, this contemplation will aid us in better understanding our comfort with our status, income, responsibilities, special projects, reputation, colleagues, competitors, and even aspects of our daily routine. It is the attachment to this comfort that generates the fear of losing it all, even though we logically know that we do not get to keep anything in this existence forever.

The fear creates clinging and causes us to suffer. If unchecked, this fear and suffering can cause us to act in ways that are unproductive or even destructive. We do not document that new homegrown reserve system we just designed, believing that will put us on the path to permanent employment. We do not share our product design experience and knowledge with our lieutenants, and never bring any of them to critical meetings, in the secret hope that we will be seen as indispensable by senior management and promoted further. We do not share credit for making headway into a new geographic region with promising growth prospects, looking for that magic bullet that will finally get us the recognition that we've always deserved.

We can move beyond this fear, and not let it control us:

- We contemplate our professional strengths and array of accomplishments.
- We analyze the challenges ahead of us, and lay out a game plan for taking them on.
- We take stock of our development needs, and commit to making inroads at reducing them.
- We evaluate how others can help us, even those who can replace us.
- We visualize successful and harmonious collaboration, humbly realizing that others have been and will continue to be part of our achievements.

In short, we keep moving forward with the inner confidence in our abilities and trust in our intuition to continue to use them in the best way we know how.

We do this even when the curtain draws on a particular chapter of our professional life. We do this especially then, for no job lasts forever. Employment experience is another part of the always-shifting sands of change and impermanence discussed in the fifth installment, “The Sands Are Always Shifting.” The next installment will explore this truth in more detail and introduce the Buddhist concept of emptiness and associated contemplations to help come to terms with this workplace reality. ●

ENDNOTE

¹ The first five installments in the “Zen Actuary” series, “Balancing the Two Efforts,” “Be Authentic,” “Don’t Just Check the Box,” “Embrace the Chaos” and “The Sands Are Always Shifting,” were published in the November 2013, February 2014, August 2014, November 2014 and February 2015 issues of *The Stepping Stone*, available online at www.soa.org/mpd.