

The Faster You Go, the More Balance You Get

My lifelong passion for cycling started with a lesson 45 years ago, one as applicable to success in business as it was to learning to ride a bike.



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Not long ago, a friend asked how many century bicycle rides (100+ miles) I had completed in my lifetime. I guessed at least three dozen. That number includes three Bay-to-Bay events in successive years during which I rode the 205 miles from Whitefish Bay, Wisconsin, to Ellison Bay, Wisconsin, in a single day. It includes several Buff Epics in which a group starts in Boulder, Colorado (elevation 5,380 feet), and climbs 28 miles to Ward, Colorado (elevation 9,480 feet), and then rides another 82 miles following the summit. Criterium races, road races, cyclocross races, group rides, mountain bike trips in the Rockies, spring training trips to Indiana's "Breaking Away" country, and rides along the coast of California. Thousands and thousands of miles on my bikes. But before I could accomplish any of this I first had to learn how to ride.

Most of us likely remember our first bike. Mine was orange, my favorite color. Its seat was a deep-draw-steel stamping. It had white plastic pedals and training wheels. It wasn't freewheel, meaning it didn't glide. If I pedaled forward, it traveled forward. If I pedaled backwards, the bike traveled backwards. Today's cycling enthusiasts would call that style

of drivetrain a "fixie;" back then, it was just a simple kid's bike, and I loved that little bike.

My cousin Gene lived with us for about a year back then. After four years in the Navy, he moved the 450 miles or so from his hometown in southwestern Minnesota to ours in southeastern Wisconsin to get a

new start on life. I was four years old, and about the time he moved in, I was ready for someone to teach me to ride my bike without training wheels. Gene took the job.

We all know the routine: Gene's hand on the seat, he balanced the bike upright. Tentatively, I started pedaling, with him walking behind me. I gained a little speed, and he started trotting and encouraging me. "The faster you go," he would yell, "the more balance you get." Eventually, I would get going fast enough that he couldn't keep up. He would release his hand, and off I would go—for a few pedal strokes. Then the front wheel would jostle back and forth and I would careen this way and that down the sidewalk before finally crashing to the ground, skinning a knee or an elbow. "Ready to try again?" Gene would ask with a smile.

"No."

Until the next day.

And the day after, and the day after that.

Before long, I could fly up and down the block

on my bike with no help at all, thanks in large part to my cousin Gene.

The faster you go, the more balance you get. Certainly true of the physics of riding a bicycle, and of running a business as well.

I'm now on my fourth business, having led an startup, a custom coater, a surface finishing supplier and now an advanced manufacturing skills training company. With every new position, I have endeavored to do big things, building on the company's tradition and taking it in expanded directions quickly, accelerating growth and trying my best to make a mark. Each time, about six months into the job, a team member inevitably has said, "We're trying to do too much; we're moving too fast."

My patent response: "The faster you go, the more balance you get."

It always elicits a perplexed look on the part of the person receiving the message. And then I tell the story of how I learned to ride a bike and how, as scary as it was, the faster I could get the bike moving, the easier it was to stay upright. This concept works in business, too.

A mentor once told me that rapid growth enables us to get away with a lot of mistakes in business. When a business isn't growing, every miscue takes it backward, adversely affecting profitability and cash flow, and making the mistake stick out like the proverbial sore thumb. Growth covers up the effects of the mistake and prevents us from dwelling on it, enabling us to quickly learn from our errors and to move on.

Moving fast keeps our teams engaged and challenged, it keeps our customers enthused, and it encourages us to stay on the cutting edge of whatever is driving our market. It requires creativity and innovation, both key to business success. Moving fast confounds our competitors, leaving them wondering how we do it. Most important, moving fast is fun!

On August 6, my cousin Gene lost his battle with cancer, and that has caused me to pause more than just a few times to think about the cycling lesson he taught me so many years ago and the life lesson that came along with it:

The faster you go, the more balance you get. ■■■

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