How to Live in the Uncomfortable

A few weeks ago, I published an article about how progression in accounting won't happen until firm leaders and even staff learn to operate outside of their comfort zones. But how does one live in the uncomfortable?

It all starts with a discussion. This is what happened at a recent Accounting Alchemy Network lyceum that addressed the very issue of what constitutes uncomfortable things in professional life and, moreover, how we as a profession can begin to live in it in order to enact change.

In my article, I pointed out that the three core things needed most for the accounting profession to progress are anything that promotes a better life/work balance, true diversity and inclusion, and posting entry and even mid-level positions at a higher pay than current rates.

These aren't new concepts, but the point of our AAN discussion was that nothing will happen by just talking about it or shying away when things feel out of our comfort zones. For many, these are uncomfortable things to do as well as discuss. Not as in causing physical discomfort, but actually being outside the usual "what we've always done," which, if we're being honest, is where most accountants and firm leaders have lived.

So what can be done to break out of this long-tread path of "same old" comfort of working long hours, being compensated based on that time, and accepting the lack of diversity in the profession along with the starting and even mid-level pay that comes with being an accountant? According to Accounting Alchemy co-founder Ingrid Edstrom, accountants may need to live in what's known as "the stretch zone."

"When we are talking about living in the uncomfortable, we're not telling people they need to be living in panic. Start by looking at the clients, staff, and systems you have in place and asking if they are making you happy and meeting your needs." But it goes even deeper than that. Not that it's a super intellectual question to ask, but more so, it's about identifying what uncomfortability feels like.

"As we think about the answers to these questions, most of the answers are going to come from a place where you are realizing after the fact that I am now uncomfortable. Hopefully, with what we can do through work, we can get to the point where we can see the discomfort coming and we're prepared for it," according to Jina Etienne, a Certified Diversity Executive and AAN member.

What also came out of the discussion was that "discomfort" does not equal "harm," especially when it comes to change. It is literally just that—a place we're not used to being.

But for anyone who has started a new business, traveled to a new place, been around a group of people they don't quite know or relate to, or even tried a different piece of software, there is a lack of comfort. More importantly, it's not necessarily a bad thing or a hurtful thing, and living in that state, even for a while, is when true change can (and usually does) happen.

Now, we all get it. Even beginning to talk about things that make us feel uncomfortable—be it issues that impact our financial lives, race and diversity, or any matters where we have personal feelings attached -- may not seem like the best approach to solving these issues. However, it cannot be overstated how taking that step will lead to the changes you want to see.

As indicated above, recognizing uncomfortability and seeing it coming is a key step. Pushing through that feeling to embrace it in a way that one steps into a seemingly cold pool for the first time, only to acclimate to it a few minutes later, is an appropriate analogy for where necessary change can start to happen.

In the end, I have found that there is a true community in accounting, and, as such, we can start to have conversations about these issues among our most trusted colleagues and peers. Those talks make me uncomfortable, but they will have a ripple effect in this great community. We have to be OK, not feel OK, sometimes. It is where and how progress is made and has the potential to change the mindset of this profession from “the nature of the beast” and “this is the way it’s always been” to a new way of living and working.

Accounting Alchemy Network meetups happen virtually and fairly regularly. Do get to know their efforts and, to reiterate a well-coined phrase, be a part of the change you want to see.