BOOK REVIEW

Long Fuse, Big Bang

Eric Haseltine, Ph.D.

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ABSTRACT

In Long Fuse, Big Bang, the author posits that millions of years of human conditioning often limit us from achieving significant accomplishments, because we are built to focus on immediate tasks and reserve energy for responding to threats to our basic survival. We can overcome these natural limitations, however, by being aware of how our brain is conditioned and by taking calculated, incremental steps to achieving the “big bangs” in our workplaces. Different from many business strategy books, this book is based on the author’s unusual career and offers a fresh perspective on effecting change in the research administrator’s personal and professional life.

Research administration is, at the very least, a career path that requires juggling multiple deadlines, making difficult and often unpalatable decisions, and responding to the needs of endless masters, including faculty, sponsors, administrators, and students. As a result, our typical work day is often fraught with stress, which triggers our mind and body to respond in a primal, survivalist mode. When stress occurs, the body’s sympathetic nervous system immediately reacts and chemicals like adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol are released into our bloodstream. In turn, our
respiratory rate increases, and blood is directed away from organs and into our muscles and limbs, which require extra energy and fuel for running and fighting, commonly known as the “fight or flight” response. This ancient conditioning is unconscious and remains with us today, so that in our present times we cannot reasonably react by running from unhappy faculty or picking up a club to fend off problematic cost transfers, even though our body is prepared to do exactly that. These automatic stress responses, which are meant to guarantee our survival, can accumulate over time and create not only multiple health and welfare risks, but sabotage our efforts to achieve bigger accomplishments in the workplace.

In Long Fuse, Big Bang, Eric Haseltine addresses how this hard-wired response to handling day-to-day stresses prevents us from achieving “big bangs,” which he describes as revolutionary changes that completely transform products or processes. These big bangs must have long fuses—projects, initiatives, or investments that arise from logical strategic planning rather than from our risk-averse fight-or-flight mechanism. In other words, he maintains that we focus on reacting to the small stuff that we are faced with in our daily tasks, called “the tyranny of the urgent.” This “stifles the pursuit of the important”, severely limiting our abilities and results in making smaller and less satisfying accomplishments.

He states that “we spend so much time lighting short fuses to firecrackers (the endless meetings, deadlines, impatient bosses) and never lighting long fuses to dynamite (the big bangs)” (pp. 13–14). This certainly can be a problem in research administration—we invest most of our time and energy each day putting out fires and ultimately delay strategic planning for “big bang” goals, such as expanding services for anticipated needs or reviewing best practices to reduce inefficiencies.

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In order to help overcome this biological conditioning that is designed to protect us from mortal threats and survive in the wilderness, we as research administrators in the present must learn why it is so difficult to accomplish big goals so that we may co-opt, not fight, the brain’s ancient logic. When we avoid a big project and feel that it is too large or time-consuming to undertake, it is because our brain has
already chosen the less strenuous activity for us. In prehistoric times it was impossible to know when you would eat your next meal, so the body is programmed to conserve calories, which translates in the here and now to choosing smaller tasks or prioritizing workload by immediate deadlines. This also explains why we experience physical and emotional reactions to deadlines, multi-tasking and planning for the future—we’re expending energy that our bodies are determined to conserve.

To show how we can build big bangs and bigger accomplishments into our work, he provides interesting examples from his own unusual career experiences and those of others who implemented new concepts, ideas, and technologies into workplaces that otherwise would have been very difficult, if not impossible. We can learn techniques to break down large projects into small tasks and expend less energy so as to provide the brain the quick rewards it needs while we at the same time work towards long-term goals.

From a research administration perspective, the strategies discussed are particularly inspiring when thinking about how to manage resistance to big-picture ideas and obtain buy-in from faculty and administration. So even though this book is not written specifically for research administrators, the strategies presented easily can and arguably should be applied to our work.

In the vast market of business strategy books, *Long Fuse, Big Bang* is surprisingly different. The examples from Haseltine’s multifaceted career are highly interesting, and in each he breaks down the contributing success factors in a compelling and entertaining manner. Each chapter details various scenarios for achieving long-fuse, big-bang success by counter-acting our natural instincts. His personable and relaxed style draws you in, and he concludes each chapter with a concise summary in case you missed his main points. Most importantly, we are reminded that we are human, and even though programmed with ancient survival instincts that can complicate the way we work in the 21st century, we have the power to transform our thinking and behaviors to achieve long-term success.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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