

The Sigmoid Growth Curve: Challenge and Assurance

By Kerwin Steffen

In his book *The Age of Paradox* Charles Handy points to the sigmoid growth curve as the ubiquitous S-shaped curve that plots not only the life of any organism or the life-cycle of any product, but also the life of an organization, the progress of a civilization, and even the course of a relationship.

As Figure 1 shows, every new life, every new organization, project, initiative, or relationship starts out falteringly at inception. Then it grows, enters a mature stage, and finally declines and perishes.

If that were all there were to this concept, it would be pretty depressing. What makes it positive and encouraging, however, is the fact that an organization can proactively *start its own new sigmoid curve* in any focus area it wants rather than just watching the old curve go over the hill and die out.

The inevitable “dip” during Inception

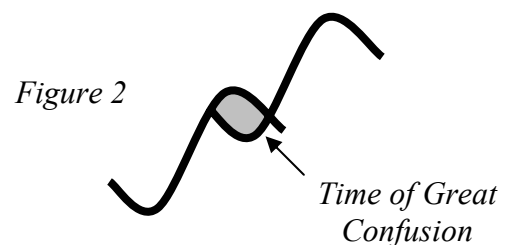
During the Inception Phase of a new growth curve, the organization almost always experiences a dip, an apparent setback. There’s a temporary but real and sometimes alarming drop in resources and a sagging energy, effectiveness, and productivity on the part of work teams and individuals.

Parents of newborn babies know from experience that before an infant begins to grow following birth, it actually loses weight for a time. This can be alarming for a new Mom and Dad unless they have been told to expect this normal dip in weight.

Likewise, as organizations encounter changes or embark on new initiatives, they need to recognize that when they are in the Inception Phase of a growth curve they will experience a temporary dip. And people throughout the organization will do well to remind one another that such a dip is normal.

Every new growth curve (each new effort and even each small change in the goals or makeup of a group) triggers another Inception Phase with its characteristic dip and its accompanying anxiety.

On the positive side, that dip during the Inception Phase is akin to flexing your knees before you jump over a physical obstacle. By temporarily squatting (dipping), you can jump much higher and farther than you could with your knees straight.



The challenge of coexisting curves

Even so, this dip presents a significant challenge. As shown in Figure 2, whenever an organization begins a new growth curve, *the new and old curves must coexist for a time*, as indicated by the shaded area. Experts have named this period the Time of Great Confusion.

The organization needs visionary, entrepreneurial leadership and an optimistic, courageous group spirit during this period, in order to:

- Manage the chaos, confusion, denial, and inevitable tension of *sustaining both curves* during that period when you are preparing to let go of the older one. (This can be a very traumatic time for those who have a stake in the old curve. They may strongly resist the new curve with its changes.)
- Remain open to constant questioning, learning, and adjusting as the group navigates its way through new, uncharted territory.
- Summon the confidence and the discipline (*a*) to allow resources to be pulled from the old curve (i.e., the “tried and true” way of doing things) and applied to the new, unproven one and (*b*) to develop totally new resources to support the new growth curve.

Illuminating the Time of Great Confusion

The shaded area called the Time of Great Confusion in Figure 2 is characterized by shadows of uncertainty about how to proceed.

Nothing else is half as powerful at illuminating those unsettling shadows of the Inception Phase as the light that shines in an organization with a healthy, robust group spirit—an organization that has the *Spirit Edge*™.

The Eight *Spirit Edge*™ Pathways

Whether the group is a community, a business, a non-profit group, a government agency, or even a family, there are Eight *Spirit Edge*™ Pathways to Breakthrough Performance that can assure safe passage through the Time of Great Confusion:

1. Commitment to a compelling shared **Paradigm**: *align and focus your organization.*
2. The right **People** in the right roles: *maximize individual strengths and minimize weaknesses.*
3. Broad, inclusive, skilled **Participation**: *generate commitment and synergy.*
4. A passion for **Processes**: *spark creativity and sharper thinking.*
5. Continual **Prospecting** for “gold”: *create a culture of openness, humility, and discovery and an abundance mentality.*

Meet change head-on

A number of new sigmoid curves are born every day in any given organization. Organizations that want to succeed respond to the inevitability of change in three significant ways:

1. They realistically and continually assess internal and external shifts and trends. Then they make strategic changes (start new sigmoid curves) to position themselves to seize the opportunities that flow out of those evolving forces.
2. They vigilantly scan the horizon for changes that may simply be forced upon them from the outside. Then they minimize the negative effects of any involuntary new sigmoid curves they encounter.
3. They build a *Spirit Edge*™ culture of unity, integrity, and alignment that gives them the flexibility and the strength they need to survive and even thrive in times of chaos and change.

6. Continual, ongoing **Planning**: *map out the action steps toward your vision.*
7. Early successful **Performance**: *build confidence and momentum and attract support.*
8. Frequent optimistic and encouraging **Performance Feedback**: *boost job-satisfaction, accountability, and continuous improvement.*

Each of these Eight *Spirit Edge*™ Pathways suggests and encompasses whole volumes of interactive principles and concepts that can be brought to bear on an organization’s situation.

Courage to start a new Growth Curve

One final note: The secret to continued growth in an organization is to start a new sigmoid curve before the old one goes over the hump and plummets downhill to its demise.

The highest point on any existing sigmoid curve from which a new curve is likely take off successfully is during the Maturity Phase and is indicated by Point A in Figure 3. This is usually the latest point at which there are still time, resources, and energy to get the new curve through its initial faltering uncertainty before the old curve has turned the corner (Point Z) and begun its inevitable slide to oblivion.

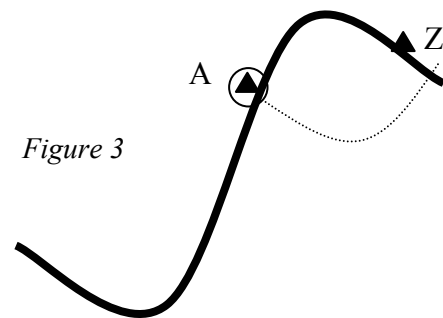


Figure 3

In today’s crazy world, some growth curves last only days, or even minutes, as opposed to months or years. Successful groups, groups that have the *Spirit Edge*™, recognize the signs of a mature curve and courageously initiate a new one at exactly the right moment. Then they move in unity toward their new shared vision with humility, openness, and integrity.

For more information about this topic and how your organization can experience *Spirit Edge*™ breakthrough performance, contact:

K. W. Steffen Associates
P. O. Box 67
New Glarus, WI 53574
Voice 608.527.5896
E-Mail info@SteffenAssociates.com

