

A Generic Approach to Improvement

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I'm a strong advocate for intentional improvement.

You can't control everything in your life, but you can control your choices. And you can influence people and circumstances. Focused effort is much more effective if you are intentional about it.

A couple of weeks ago, I was challenged by a client who asked, "Hey Dennis, you're always encouraging us to look for better ways to do our work. You advocate that we move in the direction of excellence. Can you describe a general approach for making those positive changes?"

I gave an immediate answer that satisfied this individual, but I didn't stop thinking about the question. I knew I should develop the response into an article I could share.

The first step is to describe current reality as accurately as possible. You'd think this would be easy, but that's not always so. We human beings tend to deceive ourselves. Sometimes we describe our circumstances as much better than they really are (because we all like to look good). And sometimes we describe our situation as much worse than it really is (because we all like to receive compassion).

Self-deception is one of the most troubling conditions that leaders face. We think we see "the truth," but we can't discern the misleading influence of our assumptions and biases. So, right here at the start of this generic process is an opportunity for collaboration.

You'll have a more accurate view of current reality if you have additional eyes offering observations. That's why I usually begin my work with leadership teams by conducting an organizational health assessment. I interview a cross section of individuals to obtain as accurate a picture of what currently exists as they can generate.

After describing "what is," the next step is to imagine "what could be." For improvement to occur, you have some desired outcome in mind. It's an objective for which you are willing to strive.

This doesn't have to be extensive or time consuming. You already do it all the time. A simple example is a grocery shopping list. You make a note of all the items you want to have in the pantry and refrigerator that aren't currently there--lettuce, milk, vegetable soup, and coffee.

Most leaders (and even most workers) have a vision of what they want to create. Unfortunately, these are independent thoughts, isolated in the minds of each person. Since no collaboration occurred to compare imaginations, there is no clear organizational picture of the objective. So, everyone works (perhaps diligently!) toward a slightly different outcome. Maybe it's worth a little time and effort to articulate an organizational vision.

Once you know current reality and the desired future, the next step is to identify the barriers or obstacles that prevent you from being there already.

As soon as you start listing the obstacles, you realize there are many. The more obstacles you list, the more there are that present themselves! My suggestion is that you capture every limitation, even those that seem insignificant. Then conduct an "obstacles analysis."

Several years ago, I wrote "Evaluating Obstacles and Risks," an article you can find on my website (see address below). Click on the "Article Archives" page and scroll down alphabetically.

Everything to this point has been logical and analytical. Pause for a moment and assess your feelings about all of the above. You're probably feeling some discomfort or you wouldn't be considering making changes.

If you have intense feelings, allow them to come forth. It's likely you've been repressing them, disguising your discomfort with what currently exists. By allowing your passion for the future state to arise, you stimulate the energy you'll need to execute your chosen behaviors.

With as many organizational participants as practical, brainstorm ideas for overcoming the most significant obstacles. Then determine the cost and benefits of each idea. Prioritize your potential action steps.

Determine who will do what by when. Somebody should keep a master list of activities. Set up a time to reconnect and have each person report on actions taken. All that has happened to this point is some collaborative thinking. Thinking is good, but no improvement occurs until somebody takes action!

When you reconnect, celebrate the progress that's been made. Take a fresh look at the action steps. Determine if something needs to be amended, or if some new activities should be added.

Continue to repeat all of the above until you and your colleagues are satisfied with your progress.

Then prepare to start the process again, because it won't be long until you realize that there is a lot of additional improvement that is possible!