

Action--The Most Visible of the Six Stages of Change

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The Nike commercials encourage you to “Just do it!” That may work great for a weekend athlete. But someone in training for a major event requires a more intentional focus.

Over the past few weeks, I’ve been working up to the “do it” stage. The basis for those recent articles has been *Changing for Good*, a book by James Prochaska, John Norcross, and Carlo DiClemente. The necessary prerequisites to the action stage are the precontemplation, contemplation, and preparation stages (contact me if you’d like to see those articles).

Laying the appropriate groundwork for improvement is usually not visible to outsiders, so there’s little affirmation for moving through those first three stages. Precontemplation, contemplation, and preparation are all “thinking” stages that occur privately in your mind. Oh, you might have conversations with a trusted colleague, but most people don’t know about those. And you might write down some of your “pro” and “con” thoughts about moving in the direction of new behaviors.

Once you transition from the “thinking” stages to the “doing” stage, however, your actions make your intent to change more visible. If you’ve not adequately prepared those around you to expect different behaviors, they’ll likely be wondering, “Hey, what’s going on?” That’s why it is so important in the preparation stage to obtain support and encouragement from those you admire and respect.

Make no mistake, however; there will be barriers, both in the external environment and internally. One obstacle I hear about frequently is, “I don’t have time to execute my real work if I’m working on my leadership development plan.” That’s a sure sign that the individual does not yet understand that the leadership efforts require doing the real work in an intentionally different way. You cannot continue to do things as you always have and at the same time experience healthier outcomes.

CAUTION: Executing your chosen behaviors in the action stage must be one of your highest priorities. If you merely attempt to squeeze in your improved activities whenever you have time, you are almost guaranteed to relapse into previous, less effective habits.

Despite prevalent television ads for weight loss, clear skin, and debt reduction, there are no “magic bullets” or miracle cures. For improved leadership, no matter what you try, some people will complain because you are behaving differently. Sometimes they’ll protest to you, but more often they’ll grumble to each other. The pain of struggling with new approaches while observers protest is terribly discouraging, but you must persevere through it to achieve your desired outcome.

Persist. You’ll see evidence that your changed behaviors are having beneficial effects. Continue to substitute your more healthy responses for your former actions. Find small but tangible ways to reward your desirable behaviors and remind yourself to avoid the previous, less effective conduct.

At some point, your progress will reach a plateau. Your first response may be to buckle down, doing more of the same, maybe with greater intensity. You have likely reached a new equilibrium. If that happens, experiment.

Use your coach, mentor, colleague, or close friend to help you generate ideas for new and totally different approaches. Knowing someone is genuinely “for you” can provide the support and encouragement you need to press on toward your objective.

Imagine your efforts achieve the outcome you envisioned. You may think you’ve “finally arrived”! Ah, but your journey is not yet complete. To avoid falling back into former habits, you will move into the maintenance stage. Next week, learn what’s required to protect the progress you’ve made.

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