

Change, Control, and Consistency

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Last week's article on consistency and predictability aroused some interesting dialogue. (You can see that article on my website; click on "Dennis' blog.") A few people contended that if they behave consistently and predictably, their organizations will never improve!

Improving leadership skills and organizations is what I'm all about. So, these folks challenged me about my own consistency. "You encourage that I be consistent, yet you also encourage me to be the organization's biggest advocate for change! And you tell me I have to model the behaviors I want. If I want people to improve, don't I have to be improving, too? How can I, at the same time, both improve and not change?"

I think these folks were just having fun with me, but the dialogue stimulated my thinking. So let's explore these concepts.

It feels like everybody wants you to change, right? Your customers want you to change. Your employees do, too. Also, your suppliers. Your spouse. Your pastor. Your boss. Your doctor. Advertisers want you to change what you buy!

And you want everyone to change, too. You want your children to change. Your parents. Your employees. Your suppliers. Your competitors. Your spouse. Your neighbors. Your boss.

You even want yourself to change! Your financial situation. Your skills. Your routines. Your weight. Your discipline. Your confidence. Your consistency and predictability.

If you and just about everybody you know are advocates of change, why is it that we have this belief that people resist change? Actually, you're all for change when you initiate the idea. You (and your employees) tend to resist change typically when someone is forcing a change on you. Sometimes you resist even when you know the outcome of the change will be beneficial.

That point is worth thinking about. Why do you sometimes resist change that someone else proposes for you, even when you know the result of the change would be good for you?

Because, in addition to beneficial outcomes, you want control. You want to control what you do. You even want to control what you think about doing.

Ponder that thought for a moment. You can probably recall situations where you refused to comply with a suggestion even though you agreed it was a good idea. It just wasn't your idea!

If you look beyond what appears to be resistance to change, you actually find a desire to maintain control. Over the next few weeks, allow your awareness to confirm or deny this insight. Also, become aware of your own resistance when your spouse or your employees (or your leadership enhancement coach) offers a suggestion.

Let's look back at what I advocated for you last week—that you become more consistent and predictable in your behaviors.

You might say, "Look, when I change my mind, it's because I think I'll obtain a better outcome for my efforts. What's wrong with that?"

For you, perhaps there is nothing wrong with changing your mind. However, your behaviors have effects that you never intended or even considered. When you change your mind, your employees start wondering, "What effect will that have on me?"

Oh, they likely won't ask that question out loud. They may just feel some unconscious anxiety between a desire to satisfy the boss and a desire to retain control of their own little world.

When the boss changes his or her mind often, it's hard to predict what the boss will want next. So, the potential for disruption is continual. "What's wrong with that?" you might ask. "Keeping them on their toes is a good thing, isn't it?"

Maybe. Do you want your team members to respond to your every whim as if they are robots? Compliance is not a bad thing, of course. Research indicates, however, that the most effective organizations are those that go beyond compliance to commitment.

For that to occur, each individual must feel a sense of ownership and control over his or her responsibility. Establishing a systematic, repeatable process for doing their work is a big part of that devotion. For you to come into work one day and dictate a significant change implies to the worker that he or she has not been thinking in terms of intentional improvement.

Here's another option. Go to the person who will be affected by your suggestion and say, "I've been thinking about some improvements I'd like to suggest. I imagine you've got some thoughts about what you might do differently if you had the freedom and the resources to make change. Would you please consider what changes you might like to make in your operations, and let's explore possibilities together next Wednesday at 1:00?"

That way, you establish an environment where the two of you can genuinely collaborate. You'll be able to hear the ideas of the person currently most familiar with the work and perhaps merge them with yours. If you do this well a number of times with different people, the chances are that your employees will start initiating those kinds of conversations with you.

In time, you'll find you rarely have to use your authority to demand changes. You'll have established a far more collaborative culture, and you'll find everyone more focused on intentional improvement than you ever imagined.

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