

Preparation--A Necessary Step Prior to Taking Action

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For the past several weeks, I've been describing each of the six stages of change as presented in *Changing for Good*, a 1994 book by James Prochaska, John Norcross, and Carlo DiClemente. The six stages are precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination.

If you missed any of the previous weeks' articles, contact me and I'll provide those columns. This week we look at the preparation stage. As any homeowner who has tackled painting a room knows, preparing the surface is extremely important if you want a proper finished appearance. Attempting to shortcut the preparation stage will almost always result in some form of rework.

In their original research, the authors did not separate preparation from the contemplation stage. Their experience, however, dictated a refinement. They determined that the mental, emotional, and physical progress that occurs in the preparation stage is critical for successful change.

In the contemplation stage, you evaluate the cost of making change against the advantages of engaging in new behaviors. Moving into the preparation stage, you zero in on the precise actions that will move you toward your desired future state. You are increasingly confident in your decision to proceed. Your awareness of the potential enhancements in your life spurs your commitment.

The preparation stage is the mental creation that precedes the physical creation. To an outside observer, this stage seems like a rehearsal for action. You are anchoring your resolve, so that no lingering ambivalence will undermine your devotion to improvement.

You are no longer gathering information about the problem, as you did in the contemplation stage. You've now progressed to considering options and planning those particular approaches that you believe will move you forward with the greatest return on your investment of time and energy.

Whether your plans are simple or complex, they must be specific. Further, you must prepare yourself to make your chosen actions a high priority. If you merely attempt to squeeze your new activities in when you have time, you are almost guaranteed to relapse back into previous habits.

Prepare your friends, family members, and colleagues (as well as your mentor or coach) with guidance on how they can support you. They will appreciate a list of "do's and don'ts." If you provide clear expectations, they are more likely to offer encouragement and helpful feedback.

A great motivator is a clear vision of what your life will be like when you have achieved your desired outcomes. Generate a listing of the benefits you will enjoy and keep that list in front of you for ongoing inspiration. The structural tension between your current reality and your preferred future state will stimulate your forward progress.

Healthy organizations wanting further improvement must also pass through these six stages of change. Sometimes, they get stuck in the contemplation stage, not certain where to put their energies. They may be at a plateau of some kind, unaware of how to make additional progress.

I usually suggest an organizational health assessment, consisting of interviews with a cross-section of the team members. The process provides ample new information for improvement opportunities. Strengths that can be enhanced are identified, and limitations that have become accepted as part of the landscape are brought into focus. With these new insights, the team is able to prepare for actions that will yield an improved culture, superb processes, and ultimately better results.

Please join me next week when we explore "action," the most visible of the six stages of change.

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