

Preserving Your Improvement for the Long-Term

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Everything in life degrades and needs attention to retain health. Your car needs an oil change. The roof is leaking and you're not sure why. The doctor says your lung capacity is diminishing with age.

Even your relationships need maintenance. At this time of year, many of us pull out a list of close friends and realize we've not communicated since Christmas of last year.

James Prochaska, John Norcross, and Carlo DiClemente identify six stages of change in their book *Changing for Good*. The fifth stage of change is "maintenance."

In past weeks, I've focused on precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, and action. (Contact me to see those articles.) Progress achieved in the action stage can revert back to former behavior. Your objective, however, is permanent improvement that becomes a part of who you are.

Lasting enhancement is rarely attained without false starts and slips along the way. Sustaining new behavior is not like the intermittent one-time attention required to maintain a car or a house. Maintaining improved conduct is a daily, sometimes hourly demand. This stage rarely lasts fewer than six months and may require the rest of your life.

Overconfidence. In celebrating your progress, it's easy to forget the negative impact of your former behaviors. Denial and deception are the big killers of successful leadership. Open yourself to focused feedback from others who recognize your improvement but realize that relapse is possible.

Temptations. The beliefs you adopted as a child never go away. The behaviors you've practiced since early in your career will feel comfortable to you forever. Your underlying paradigms and habitual behaviors are always present, ready to reveal themselves in the most unexpected ways. Old habits die hard. After all, you adopted them because they once served you well!

Self Criticism. As you've gained new awareness, you've rejected your former behaviors. Your new expectations may cause you to be intolerant of your human variability. Negative self-talk can lead to exaggerated condemnation and blame, such as "I will never be good enough...."

Because slips are going to happen, commit to learning from each one. First, take responsibility for your lapses. You may be tempted to blame stress, the circumstances, or other people for how you reacted this particular time. However, there is huge power in acknowledging that in all situations, both this most recent one and future ones, you have freedom to choose your response.

Second, recognize that a single lapse does not mean failure or even a significant setback. Because an occasional slip is normal, plan on catching yourself as soon as you notice former behaviors. Quickly recommit to your desired objective. If other people were affected, offer a sincere apology, restate your allegiance to improved behaviors, and make a request for their help if appropriate.

Your colleague, coach, or mentor can be extremely beneficial in the maintenance stage. Give expanded freedom to confront you if he or she observes tendencies toward former behaviors. If you feel stress, weakness, or a potential reversion coming on, call your ally for strength and accountability. Look for opportunities to help someone else make the improvements you've just made. (This is why building future leaders is so powerful--you help yourself as you help others!)

Continually reinforce your commitment to long-term improvement. Our society is so short-term focused that the environment will inevitably influence your thinking. Remind yourself that you are making this improvement for the rest of your life. Preserving your progress takes constant attention.

Use your evolution as verification that you are learning and growing. Reward yourself for each new awareness, such that "recognizing opportunities for improvement" becomes your new normal insight. Your "new normal" is what we'll explore next week in the termination stage.

Healthy organizations go through these same stages of change. Contact Dennis Hooper at dhooper2@juno.com, (478)-988-0237, or through his website: www.buildingfutureleaders.com.