

Reaching Your Desired Outcome--A New, Healthier "Normal"

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2008, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on Sat. December 20, 2008

Over the past five weeks, I have been working my way through the six stages of change described in *Changing for Good* by James Prochaska, John Norcross, and Carlo DiClemente.

Let's say that at some time in the past, you had never even considered building leaders among those individuals under your authority. You'd have been in the "precontemplation" stage. Once you started thinking about whether developing your direct reports would be desirable (and why you'd never considered this idea before), you'd have moved into the "contemplation" stage.

If you concluded that building future leaders would be a good idea for you and your organization, you would then enjoy the anticipation associated with moving into the "preparation" stage. You'd start actively planning for how you could cause that growth to happen. Then you would have taken "action" in a variety of ways, each designed to move you closer to that objective.

Last week I talked about the joys and anxieties associated with consolidating your changes while in the "maintenance" stage, which usually lasts six months or more. Actually, few improvements advance into the "termination" stage, this week's focus.

Individuals seeking major improvement rarely move cleanly through all six stages. Most experience a few lapses and sidetracks, cycling back through previous stages. "Trial and error" is a very effective way of learning. Although the insights gained are anchored firmly, they often come through frequent and painful errors made along the way. Satisfactory improvement may take more time and energy than you had originally anticipated!

Is it possible to still fall back into old behaviors? Of course. All kinds of response options are open to you. Conditions may present themselves such that you choose, intentionally or otherwise, to engage in some past habit. Change is often circular and difficult--merely acknowledge the slip and move back into the behaviors you had successfully adopted before.

Since meaningful change is a lifetime pursuit, and "continuous improvement" is characteristic of the culture of great organizations, some say that staying in the termination stage is not achievable. However, I love celebrating hard-won triumphs. I avoid the semantics and avow, "When a new, desirable 'normal' has been achieved, you've reached the 'termination' stage!"

The authors of *Changing for Good* identify four standards for confirming the termination stage:

- You have a new self-image that feels consistent with the improved behaviors.
- You feel no temptation to engage in previous behaviors, no matter what the circumstances.
- You have solid confidence in the new "normal" that characterizes your behaviors.
- You have a healthier lifestyle and culture. In the maintenance stage, you protected against slips and lapses. In the termination stage, you now live for and invite new growth.

This article started using "building future leaders" as an example of an organization seeking to make desirable improvements. I've been privileged to see this kind of sequential process take place with organizations that have installed a system for supporting leadership development.

It's much easier in the short-term for an organization to just keep doing whatever existed before. Typically, that means leaving any leadership skill development to the initiative of each individual. However, from a strategic perspective, building future leaders makes a lot of sense. Not only does the investment immediately strengthen the individuals and the organization, it keeps a supply of skilled individuals available to pursue new opportunities that will surely present themselves!

"Change" can feel scary at any time, but especially during this economic recession. Dennis Hooper believes conditions like these, however, may be the best of times to introduce change. If you are willing to explore this possibility, contact Dennis Hooper at dhooper2@juno.com or (478)-988-0237.