

Serious Contemplation—Thinking About Improvement

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I heard a story about an old dog lying on a wooden porch. A neighbor stopped by for a visit and heard the dog moaning. He asked the dog's owner about the whimpering. The owner said, "That lazy dog's just lying on a nail." The neighbor asked, "Why doesn't he move?" The owner explained, "I guess it doesn't hurt quite that much yet."

That old dog won't move until the pain lasts longer or grows stronger. How does that compare with how improvement manifests for you and your organization?

When circumstances and results are progressing well, many people invoke the cliché, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it?" Yet when times turn hard and situations are in disarray, the tendency may be to exclaim, "Let's do SOMETHING, even if it's wrong!"

Two weeks ago, I introduced six stages of change as described in the book *Changing for Good* by James Prochaska, John Norcross, and Carlo DiClemente. Those six stages are precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination. (If you missed those articles, contact me and I'll provide a copy.) Last week I focused on precontemplation; this week we move to the next stage, contemplation.

Precontemplation is characterized by avoiding thinking about the situation. The resistance may be active (such as denying a problem exists) or passive (such as not being aware that an improvement would be possible or desirable). Transition into the contemplation stage is characterized by an overt, active interest in deeply understanding the situation.

Anything that brings about increased awareness is welcomed. The individual is usually eager to talk about what led to the current circumstances, seeking assurance from supporters that this new interest is understandable and has some potential for leading toward improvement.

At this stage, individuals want to progress, but they may be reluctant to move into the next stages (preparation and action) due to the normal anxieties associated with change. They may wonder if the timing is right or if conditions might improve on their own. They may fear the unknown or doubt they will successfully achieve the desired improvement. They may lack knowledge about the potential future state or wonder how they'll handle success when they arrive there.

Past clients in this stage wonder, "How have I limited myself in the past by treating my direct reports as mere followers? Would our organization have been stronger at this point if I had delegated more responsibility and expected more initiative? What would be different if I had been intentionally stretching their leadership skills? If my direct reports start thinking and acting like leaders rather than followers, what new demands will that place on me?"

The questions that come up during this contemplation stage are rational, but have strong emotional underpinnings. There may be excitement at the prospects of a stronger future, regrets about past decisions, and apprehension about handling all the unknowns that are likely to present themselves.

Many people find an ally (a friend, mentor, or coach) beneficial at this stage. The colleague provides an understanding perspective, offers unconditional support and acceptance, and helps with research, seeking information and greater awareness. Together they generate possibilities for building a future culture that delivers better results for both employees and customers.

The contemplation stage moves you from your former denial, resistance, or lack of awareness into a willingness to prepare for new behaviors. You're ready to move out of the contemplation stage when you conclude that the advantages of making improvement outweigh the advantages of maintaining what currently exists.

Please join me next week when we investigate the importance of the preparation stage.

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