

Take an “End of Year” Inventory

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I was interviewed recently for my thoughts on how individuals might improve their chances of keeping their New Year’s resolutions. If you’ve been reading my articles lately, you know that I just finished exploring each of the “six stages of change” as described in the book *Changing for Good*.

The concept of New Year’s resolutions doesn’t fit well with what has been shown to provide excellent improvement. Folks making resolutions don’t typically examine the cost required to institute lasting change (a key part of the “contemplation” stage). Making resolutions doesn’t require extensive “preparation,” the stage that aids the likelihood of success in the “action” and “maintenance” stages.

Most organizational leaders don’t generate New Year’s resolutions, but they do often institute plans for causing institutional improvement. Before they initiate their plans, however, they usually take an inventory of what currently exists. Let’s look at what leaders typically measure.

Results. I encourage leaders, whenever they start any activity, to clearly define their desired outcomes. “Results” are the outcomes that are measured and tracked by the organization. They may be associated with the satisfaction of customers, with the quality and quantity of products and services delivered, with generated revenue, with the satisfaction and retention of employees, with contributions to the community, or with other measurable outcomes important to the organization.

Systems. The results an organization generates develop from reliable, repeatable processes that have been generated and refined over time. Action steps occur in a defined, specific sequence, often executed by different individuals. Each person receives information or an in-process “something” from somebody, then delivers an enhanced product or service to someone else. Each serves as a customer of somebody’s efforts, and each serves as a supplier to someone else.

Relationships. Paying customers are typically outside the organization. We think of suppliers as also being outside the organization, delivering information or parts or raw materials. But some suppliers and customers, as identified in the paragraph above, are internal. We usually call these individuals “employees” or “team members.” Healthy relationships, whether outside or inside the organization, are key for the ongoing success of any organization.

Leadership. The organization’s leaders are expected to know the current health of the organization and to provide guidance for how the existing systems should be directed for the future benefit of internal and external customers. Since progress will only occur if the members of the team work well together, another role of leaders is to gain alignment to upcoming plans. Leaders are to model appropriate behavior and provide the necessary tools for team members to execute their systems.

Unfortunately, it’s not always easy for leaders to discern the health of their organizations. Leaders who work closely with the other members of their teams have an especially difficult time evaluating organizational health—they are just too close to the daily activities to be accurate judges.

Sometimes a skilled outsider can help. The leader instructs his or her team members to provide their perspectives on all of the above, with the intention of identifying current strengths and limitations. A day of interviews to conduct an overt organizational assessment helps determine opportunities for improvement over the coming months.

Though I’ve given only a simple overview, I encourage you to take time to conduct an inventory of your organizational current state (or personal situation, if that’s your focus). Then, define the improved outcome you want to create, measure the cost of change in terms of time, money, and energy, and generate commitment among your team members for making it happen!

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