

Three Simple Steps to Improvement

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WARNING: You may read this article and think, “Oh, I already know all this!” Ah, but my question is, “How well do you do it?” Remember, it’s not what you know, it’s what you do with what you know!

I’m sometimes asked, “What’s the key to improvement?” It seems a lot of people want to make things better, but they want the process to be easy. The steps are simple enough to identify, but the execution of each stage is far from effortless!

Acknowledge “what is.” The first step toward improvement is becoming aware of what currently exists. Your current activities were at some point an improvement over what you did before. You were pleased with the progress such that you accepted a new “normal.” So you now go through the motions, keeping things going. You’re satisfied.

Then something happens to cause you to look at your circumstances in a fresh way. Maybe someone makes a comment, or you read an article, or you see progress that someone else is making. So, you pause and take inventory. You look at “what is” and decide, “I really must do better!”

If you are leading an organization, it’s beneficial at this stage to get everyone else involved. Having their participation will help with the execution of the changes that you and they will identify.

You can really get some ideas flowing by asking, “What are the unnecessary, time-consuming, bureaucratic procedures that consume our energy?” You might also ask, “What is it that I do (or don’t do) that prevents you from contributing your best work?” Capture all the thoughts and generate a snapshot verbal picture of “what is.”

Imagine “what could be.” Open the floor to imaginative ideas about what could be improved. Ask stimulating questions, such as, “If we did everything we could to make this a more awesome, interesting, and fruitful place to work, what would result? How would an outsider describe us then?”

Your objective in this stage is to generate a verbal snapshot of the future, a description of what might be occurring in a year or two or five. Though it’s good to allow creativity to flow, not all the ideas will be ones you’ll be willing to adopt. You’ll have to exercise some discipline over what you include and what you reject. Yes, some people may be dissatisfied with your decisions, but you are the one in authority, and everyone should be informed that you are looking to define a realistic future “what could be.”

Spend no time yet talking about how you will arrive at this place (that comes next). Just describe the circumstances as you imagine them in the future.

Generate a plan. You now have two descriptions, one of “what is” and one of “what could be.” To move from one to the other will require identifying action steps. Your behaviors will have to be different from what you are doing currently. (You may have heard: “If you always do what you’ve always done, you’ll always get what you’ve always gotten.”)

Let’s call these new behaviors “initiatives.” Since you won’t move to the desired future state immediately, you’ll need an appropriate someone to coordinate and monitor progress on each initiative. You’ll have to figure out how to phase in the new action steps without damaging the results you are currently getting. If this feels like more work than you thought it might be, you’re right. Improvement requires additional work in the short term for better results in the long-term.

Execute the plan. “Hey, wait a minute,” you might protest. “The title of this article claims ‘Three Steps’ and now you’re adding a fourth one!”

Ah, you caught me. But I did say up at the top that “the execution of the steps may not be all that easy!” You see, sometimes leaders think they’ve completed the job once the three steps have been identified. I remind you, however, that it’s not what you know, it’s what you do with what you know that counts.

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