

“Change is Hard! I Can’t Focus on Improvement Now!”

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For the past fifteen years, I’ve helped individuals and organizations improve the quality of their leadership skills. But trying to enhance effectiveness is a funny thing. When it occurs, people seem to relish it. Many people, however, resist committing to intentional, planned improvement!

I love finding suggestions to help my clients enhance their skills. In recent months, I found *Changing for Good*, a 1994 book about “overcoming bad habits and moving your life positively forward” by James Prochaska, John Norcross, and Carlo DiClemente. All are psychologists and college professors, and they have spent much of their lives studying “change.”

I love the simple but catchy book title. Think about what “changing for good” implies. I interpret it in two different ways, both of which are healthy: “change permanently” and “change beneficially.”

While a college student, Prochaska was overwhelmed by the number of change processes advocated by various “experts.” Each was backed by research indicating how that specific therapy had been successful in causing individuals with various unhealthy habits and addictions to change their lifestyles. Prochaska set out to determine which of the many methodologies was best.

His study resulted in a surprising discovery. He found that successful change progresses through six distinct stages. Each stage requires the completion of certain predictable tasks. To be successful, a person cannot skip steps, but progress may occur quickly (or frustratingly slowly).

In reading the book, I could see the relevance to the success of my past leadership clients as they improved. In future weeks, I’ll share insights with you. First, here’s an overview of the six stages.

Precontemplation. A fancy word that means, “I don’t believe I need a change.” Sometimes others see an improvement opportunity, but the individual’s typical response is denial: “I don’t have a problem, so leave me alone.” Or, as I often hear, “Things are good enough just as they are.”

Contemplation. This is where people consider possibilities. “I’m not sure how I got to this point, but I don’t want to stay where I am. Is it possible that I could make progress?” Emotions range from excitement at the possibilities to anxiety and hesitation associated with inadequacy. Fear of failure (and often, fear of success) keeps some people from committing to making progress.

Preparation. Major growth occurs when the individual begins to focus on solutions and not on the problem. Belief in possible improvement takes hold, and a feeling of anticipation replaces past resistance to thinking and planning. Options come quickly. Plans are proposed and enhanced.

Action. Physical, mental, spiritual, and social/emotional resources are put into play. Progress is more visible than in past stages, so reinforcement and encouragement come naturally and easily. Ironically, the person’s need for affirmation is much greater in the stages that precede and follow.

Maintenance. We all tend to lapse back into our former, comfortable habits. Gains that have been made are consolidated here. Freshly adopted “now typical” behaviors are recognized, reinforced, and practiced. This stage usually requires at least six months and may continue for life.

Termination. A new “normal” has been established and is now the characteristic response to circumstances. No ongoing effort or attention is required. Some improvements never progress to this stage. Many do, manifesting in a new level of health for the individual (or organization).

Where are you in your personal and organizational progress? Over the next several weeks, I’ll explore each of these stages, providing ideas that you might apply in your situation.

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