

How Does a Leader Intentionally Improve?

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A business leader recently asked the title question. He said, "I have a good knowledge of my strengths and limitations. I also have a vision of the kind of leader I'd like to become. It seems that since I can so clearly envision what I want my new 'normal' behaviors to be, I should be able to easily make them happen. Yet it just doesn't seem to work that way. What can you suggest?"

This individual is on the right track by defining what currently exists ("what is") and by adopting a clear vision of "what could be." However, deeply habitual behavior is not easy to overcome.

Let me give an example. About fifty years ago, I took typing as an elective in high school. Our teacher taught us to put two spaces after the period at the end of a sentence. I've been doing that ever since.

A colleague I highly respect recently brought to my attention that accepted practice is a single space. I resisted strongly. Then I looked for confirmation in several style manuals. Sure enough, the counsel I received many years ago is no longer (maybe never was) standard practice. (If you are as staunch in your belief as I was, check it out for yourself!)

Once convinced, I decided to simply start putting a single space after each sentence. That experience revealed to me, in a renewed and compelling way, just how difficult it is to change embedded habits!

So, what's the answer to the question of how a person changes deeply ingrained routines? The simple answer is to consciously replace the former behaviors with something extremely different. New action steps must be intentionally substituted. Like the pendulum on a clock, your behavior is likely to swing back to your old ways unless you practice something significantly distinct from your past practices.

Identifying these offsetting initiatives creates the "strategy" required to move from current reality to your vision. My clients generate an explicit "Leadership Development Plan," essentially a six month "to do" list. From a variety of sources, they collect ideas for experimenting with new behaviors.

One such superb resource is entitled *The Successful Manager's Handbook*, now in its eighth edition. When I learned about it, I was surprised it had not been required as a reference book as part of my Master's degree in Business Administration. I recommend it for your library!

You may wonder why I refer to these initiated behaviors as "experiments." Each is intended, of course, to move you toward your vision of future leadership capabilities. However, there is no guarantee that each new behavior will work better for those you influence than what you had been doing before.

Obviously, you only adopt those activities that you think will work beneficially. Occasionally, however, you find that you selected something that supposedly works for others, but fizzles when you try it. Still, you can learn a lot from a failed experiment, as Thomas Edison did in repeated failures working to invent an effective light bulb. You try something similar in a fresh way, searching for better outcomes.

As you execute your action steps, remain vigilant for new insights. These realizations are a key part of the learning process. I consider them so valuable that I invite my clients to share their newly acquired perspectives each time we talk.

Why is sharing new insights so important? Not only does verbalizing the experience reinforce the new awareness, often the very act of communication triggers additional insights. Further, identifying the new perspective allows supporting concepts, principles, and opportunities to arise during our dialogue.

Are there exceptions to the intentional identification of initiated behaviors described above? Sometimes an insight is so overwhelmingly shocking to the individual that it stimulates an immediate and lasting change. Scrooge, the miserly character in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, is an example.

Unfortunately, most of us don't experience such a sudden change in both perspective and routine behavior. For most of us, we need to replace our formerly helpful (but now detrimental) habits by consciously experimenting with freshly offsetting behaviors. Happy improvement!