

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 that counts; it's what you do with what you know that delivers results!

Further, your behavior serves as a role model for others! And you are always serving as a role model.

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. Each step is 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 created and accepted a new "normal." You got comfortable, and now you 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 you read an article, or someone offers a new expectation, or you see progress that someone else is making. So, you pause and take inventory. You look at "what is" and exclaim, "Surely we can do better!"

If you are leading an organization, it's beneficial at this stage to involve other collaborators. Having their participation will help with the execution of the changes that you and they will identify.

You can stimulate the flow of ideas 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 verbal picture of "what is." If some of what you describe borders on the intolerable, that's okay. The newly generated dissatisfaction will add to the tension between "what is" and the attractive, energizing pull of "what could be."

Imagine "what could be." Start to imagine a much improved future state. Ask stimulating questions, such as, "If we did everything we could to make this a more fruitful, awesome, interesting and effective 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. The seduction to do so is great, and many people who are not disciplined will go that route. The temptation is to take ANY action that moves you away from the unacceptable condition that currently exists. That's a great way to initiate a series of fits and starts, which won't inspire anyone. Avoid those frustrations by generating a clear vision first.

Generate a strategic 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 obviously have to be different from what you are doing currently. (You probably 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 "strategic initiatives." You'll have to figure out how to phase in the new action steps without damaging the results you are currently creating. If coming up with new initiatives feels like more work than you thought it might be, you're probably right. Intentional 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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