

“Times are Hard! I Can’t Focus on Improvement Now!”

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If you’ve read my past columns, you know that I help individuals and organizations improve. But improvement is a funny thing. When it occurs, people seem to relish it. A lot of people, however, resist making a commitment to intentional improvement!

I love finding suggestions to help my clients improve. In recent months, I found multiple references describing “six stages of change.” I’m familiar with several change models, but I had not read anything about this particular one.

So, I put “six stages of change” into an internet search engine. I discovered *Changing for Good*, a 1994 book by James Prochaska, John Norcross, and Carlo DiClemente. All are psychologists and college professors.

I love the simple but catchy title. Think about what “changing for good” implies. I interpret it 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 up with 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. Successful change progresses through six distinct stages. Each stage requires completion of certain predictable tasks. To be successful, a person cannot skip steps, but progress may occur quickly (or very slowly).

In reading the book, I could see relevance to the success of my past clients as they improved. In coming weeks, I’ll share insights with you. Let me start by sharing an overview of the six stages.

Precontemplation. A fancy word, this means “I don’t feel a need for 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. Fears of failure (and of success) keep 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, and social 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 have a tendency to lapse back into past habits. Gains that have been made are consolidated here. New “normal” 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. However, those that do result 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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