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Managing Change: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

by Jeff Davidson

One of the secrets of mastering change and being effective in life is understanding that few things progress at an even pace. As author Brian Tracy says, most of the success you'll achieve in life comes via the pattern of two steps forward, one step back. The key is to recognize that the one step back isn't fatal. Rather, it's a more or less predictable component of stepping onto new territory, venturing where you haven't gone before.

Many people give up or proceed at a less vigorous pace as they encounter the one step back, because they don't understand the cadence. Sometimes, it's three steps back, before six steps forward!

One of the easiest ways to gain perspective, especially when you've undergone tumultuous change over a prolonged period and are not sure if it's all been worth it, is to look back on where you were six months, a year, or two years ago. As an extreme example, would you give back your PC for your old IBM Selectric? I didn't think so. Would you give back your mouse for a simple standard keyboard? I doubt it. What about your ability to use e-mail, in favor of the good old U. S. Postal Service, or perhaps sending a fax? When viewed over a longer interval, chances are that many of the changes you've embraced seem as if they've always been part of your repertoire.

There is some irony, however. Once you learned how to use e-mail, for example, your ability to send messages to others was greatly enhanced. Expectations, however, rise to meet new levels of technological capability. Therefore, when you only could generate a handful of letters a day, that's what was expected of you. When you could generate 500 in a day, that became the norm. Now that you can e-mail thousands of people with a few keystrokes, what happens?

People tend to over-use the technology, hence negating the productivity benefits they sought to achieve by mastering the new technology in the first place. Another key to effective change, in this regard, is mastering a new way to do something and then not abusing the process.

Find the Trailblazer

Irrespective of what you face, there is someone within close proximity who has already blazed that trail. Someone has learned the software you're trying to learn, mastered the intricacies of the new procedure for handling customer complaints, or figured out how to make the scanner work.

In many respects, your ability to master change is roughly equal to your ability to find a trailblazer, someone who can give you key, vital inputs that will save you hours and days of frustration.

Personally, I am constantly on the lookout for mentors, even of a temporary nature. I want to talk to people who know things I need to know and can tell me when to turn left or turn right, so that I don't become unnecessarily bogged down in detail, anxious, or frustrated. I'm also willing to pay for coaches, instructors, and guides as the need becomes apparent. I network heavily, so that I am always in touch with others who have skills and experience of benefit to me and, conversely, who I can benefit as well. Relationships that last, as author Robert Ringer once said, are value-for-value relationships--both parties want to keep the connection going!

Being connected to the Internet enables you to find experts faster and easier than ever before. If you need information on a particular topic, you need only to go to the Lycos, Yahoo!, Alta Vista, or HotBot search engines, type in the key words, and immediately get a roster of web sites, articles, and information about the topic. Invariably, I find that after visiting as few as three or four sites, the names of key organizations or individuals emerge. Often, that party's e-mail, 800 number, or fax number is provided at the site.

Undoubtedly, you have your own strategy for identifying mentors, experts, and trailblazers. How often do you employ their services to help you become a master of change, particularly at the moments when it's most necessary for you to have someone walking you through the forest?

Mastering Change Also Requires Learning to Pace Yourself

How do you handle change in your professional or personal life? Your approach may be to throw your time and energy at the situation and, regardless of the frustrations and struggles you encounter, resolve to be successful. I call this the BFI approach ("brute force and ignorance"). Occasionally, you can be successful with the BFI approach to mastering change, but it's usually at a higher price than you need to pay. It is important to let the process of germination take its course.