



Two Views of Change

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

At the start of a new year, many people think of how they would like to change for the future. When we were babies, change was always a welcome event that made us more comfortable. As we grew older, change became more of a threat that often made us feel more uncomfortable, at least for a while. We are all aware that change is all around us, and it takes many forms. In this article I want to put two kinds of change under the microscope and discuss why both are important for our lives.

Incremental Change

You have heard the saying, "In every day in every way I am getting better and better." That statement is describing incremental change because it bases our improvement on what we already know how to do. Moving from our present state of knowledge and making creative tweaks to the formula propels us forward.

There is comfort with incremental change, because the new technique is close to what we already know. There is risk in these steps, but the risk is small, and we can always revert to the prior method if we fail. That is why so many New Year's Resolutions do not produce permanent change.

The power of incremental change relies on the relentless application to it. If we seek to improve our current process just a little bit every day, then before long we have made fantastic strides toward efficiency and productivity.

One downside of incremental change is that we can always make modifications that turn out to be in the wrong direction. Often we cannot tell until weeks down the road that the change we make today is really a tiny bit worse than what we were doing yesterday. It is often difficult to tell at the moment if the small changes we are making are in the right or the wrong direction.

Revolutionary Change

This kind of change happens when we keep the same objective but throw out the old process entirely and begin a whole new paradigm. The obvious downside with revolutionary change is that the risk of failure is high, but so is the payoff if it succeeds.

A good example of revolutionary change occurred in 1965 in the sport of high jumping. Throughout history, jumpers used a kind of “belly down” approach to getting maximum height over the bar. It was called “The Western Roll.” Jumpers would flatten out with stomach to the ground and kick out at just the right time to get over the bar. Along came Dick Fosbury, who decided to go over the bar backward with his back to the ground. The technique was called the “Fosbury Flop,” and Dick won the gold medal at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City using his technique. To this day, the Fosbury Flop is the most popular method for high jumping.

We often see examples of revolutionary change in common products. For example, in olden days, people had to tie thin straps around their clothes or fumble with buttons or zippers in winter to keep out the wind. That was before George De Mestral patented Velcro in 1955. It seems like a simple invention 60 years later, but then it was revolutionary.

The challenge with revolutionary change is that it is so radical we often reject it as being absurd. Even when a proposed revolutionary change fails, there are often parts of it that can be used in a slightly different way.

It is this combination of revolutionary ideas in conjunction with incremental changes that has the most power for organizations. Whether it be in the products they make or the processes they use, there should be both a constant drive for incremental change as well as the investment and alertness for revolutionary change to maximize forward progress.

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