

The Power of Incremental Change ... Small Changes Early

Thinking of our friend Euclid, you know, the guy behind the geometry that you hated in high school, there are points that we move to. Many managers look to the straight line as the most effective and efficient path from Point A to Point B. But except in the vacuum of space and in astrophysics there really are not straight lines. The reality of our world is round, as in working around all sorts of different obstacles and challenges.

Euclid talked about lines being nothing more than a series of points. You stand in a single point and make a decision on direction. The next step you take is the next point in the line, the step after the next point. Get moving and soon you have a string of points that form the line. Motion is good. But how is your sense of direction?

Navigational Changes

Recently I went on a sailing trip. It was a wonderful night and the breeze was nice and steady, from the direction that we wanted to go. Nobody else on board but the captain and I noticed the wind direction. But that was no problem, for all we had to do was tack back and forth across the bay until we got in position to have a few strong strings into the bay. The changes the captain took were small, nothing huge, but one small move after another after another until we had the wind to our side and we were flying.

I asked the skipper about why he chose the subtle moves over a few hard tacks. The smile showed the confidence of someone who knew that this was a pleasure cruise and not a race; small moves would not be noticed as people relaxed and the hard tacks would not have given us any more value, since there was no hurry. In fact, we started moving in the exact opposite direction than where we wanted to go. We were moving, and that is what mattered to the folks on board.

Politically we have seen the results of massive change. For or against the Health Care act, you cannot deny that the idea is not bad but the execution horrible. Too much change too quickly. The results are still to be played out at the time of this writing, but I suspect that much will be changed again and again over the next few years. The changes will be small; a complete rollback is not in the future. But will there be many changes.

Except for places in Western US, do the interstate highways go in straight lines for miles on end? No. But do the highways get you to where you want to go? Even in the skies above us do we travel directly from origin to destination, but from point to point, building different line segments as the plane moves from way point to way point.

I have watched many a business leader stand on a single point, not moving because they do not make the first step. Stay too long waiting to make the decision for the perfectly right direction and you may be replaced for inaction. It is better to move and then maneuver.

Perfection is the enemy of progress.

The Connection to Business Practice

How have small changes created big changes in your business?

Why did you elect to make the small change happen?

What additional changes did you make after the first one?

While business is an intellectual sport, it is a human activity. Intellectuals tend to overlook the human resistance to radical change. Emotions always come into play and to ignore the fact that people react emotionally to major change is folly.

A classic example is the fight between buyers and logisticians. Each party has established a direction and a pattern of how they look at the business transactions. Make massive changes in how either conducts the process of the transaction and there is resistance. Make small changes and let the players accept the results of the change before making the next change and progress is made.

So, how small can you make the changes to get your process directionally correct?

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How often does the attempt to make big changes gets stalled in the pursuit of perfection in your organization? What would it feel like to make progress, even if it is not perfect? Why not talk to us about the small moves?

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