



Change Continuums By Dr. Jim Beaubien

The message is clear: adapt or perish. The gospel preached by many of today's 'change masters', suggests leaders must continuously implement improvements in their organizations in order to survive. And they must do it quickly. Failure to do so puts the organization at risk.

At best this message is simplistic. At worst, it can be counter productive. While it's true organizations must adapt to survive, quickness is not always the best approach. Gradual change is far less disruptive and far more manageable. It is also less likely to produce undesirable or unanticipated side effects.

Here is a powerful but simple approach you can use for introducing improvements in your organization. It's based on dividing the change process into a series of steps along a continuum that gradually lead you to the target state. The process works like this:

1. Engage the people who will be responsible for implementing improvements. Explain your intentions, describe the approach and create a process for involving them in establishing the continuums and developing the actions required to move from step to step.
2. Clearly identify the improvement targets. For example, is it house keeping, budgeting, marketing, training or inventory management? Exactly what do you want to improve?
3. Identify your organization's current performance and the level of performance you intend to achieve in the identified area. Use these as the starting and ending points for the continuum.
4. Divide the gap between the starting and ending points into a series of three to five discrete steps. Clearly define each. This gives you the intermediate points along the continuum.
5. Define the actions that must be taken to move the organization from one level of the continuum to the next. Identify simple measures that can be used to track progress.
6. Implement the system. Set a start date and a realistic target for completing the activities required to move to the next step on the continuum. Don't rush it. Allow time for the new behaviors to become ingrained before moving on to the next step. It might take 18 to 36 months to move through a five-step continuum.
7. Make sure the people involved are held accountable. Provide the required resources and continuously monitor progress. Provide reinforcement for successful efforts and address the root causes of substandard results.

A simple example will show how this approach might be applied to a common organizational problem, personal house keeping. Assume that our current working environment is cluttered and disorganized. Important documents are scattered and difficult to find. Our ultimate target is an uncluttered personal workspace that is neat and organized. Information is filed and easy to retrieve. This description gives us our starting and ending points or our change continuum. Once the end points are identified, the intermediate steps can be defined. Our continuum might look something like this:

Level one: Everything is cluttered and disorganized. Documents are scattered and difficult to find. Filing systems are inadequate. Material is stacked in piles on desks, chairs and the floor.

Level two: Workspace is cleaned. Unwanted items are discarded. Files and papers are sorted into logical categories e.g. clients, projects, reading and administration. Piles are smaller and better organized.

Level three: The root causes of disorganization are identified and addressed. Adequate storage space is installed, workflow is defined and workspace needs are addressed. Flow charts for paper handling are developed.

Level four: Policies and standards are established. Training is provided and people are held accountable for organization in their personal workspace.

Level five: Personal workspaces are uncluttered and organized. Information is filed and easy to retrieve.

Try it. It works.