

Affecting Change to Improve Business Health (Part I)

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This is Part I of a two-part series. For Part II, [click here](#) [1].



A conversation with a friend included her tale of a discussion she had with a friend of hers. The woman is going blind due to complications caused by obesity. Her doctor told her if she didn't immediately change her diet and lose weight she would permanently lose her eyesight. Her comment was, "You would think that would make me change, but I haven't."

The parallels between personal health and business health are remarkable. Let us compare the level of commitment and effort required to change our state of personal health with that required to affect business health as a metaphor for understanding what drives successful business improvement change instead of failed efforts.

I don't know how often I have battled personally, within businesses where I was employed, or shared insights with others who needed to drive change in order to save a business in trouble, but met with an overall unwillingness to commit to change. I notice that it also happens to many of us trying to improve our fitness or health. Both types of change require a significant commitment and a great deal of work to drive a change in personal and in business health, and we don't always choose to make that committed effort.

To this day, I starkly recall a conversation with a functional leader inside of a business in which I outlined my proposed changes to improve processes and business health. His response was, "Alan, you can do whatever you want as long as

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it doesn't affect me." His exact words, yes. I refer to that type of personality as "retired in place," or RIP.

My point is that even when we know we need to make a change for our own good, we don't always choose to commit. How many times have you personally, or have folks close to you, declared intent to make a change to personal fitness or health and failed to execute? Successfully committing to and executing change requires much more than a declaration and a token effort. It requires major planning and much effort.

There are many ways to go about making changes successfully. I recall a story about a winner of the Boston marathon in the women-over-forty category. Years before the marathon she decided to begin walking as a means to get a little exercise and control her weight. Going for a walk every day was a change she successfully committed to because it was reasonably feasible and not too difficult.

After a few months, she began to pay more attention to her diet because the walking was proving beneficial and she was gaining in confidence. As her walks got longer and more enjoyable and her success gave her more confidence, she began to jog. Jogging evolved into running. Running evolved into training for races. Training for races required more attention and effort directed toward her diet and rest.

Within less than a handful of years she went from more-or-less couch potato to Boston marathon winner. I have witnessed some business improvement cultures develop similarly. A small and simple start that achieved some success subsequently led to adopting more methods and tools and to more success. Eventually, through trial and success, the business evolved a very ingrained and successful continuous improvement methodology and culture.

That's a convenient path for those with the luxury of time and business health to change slowly over time. It still doesn't happen without commitment. I've witnessed the one success and many failures as token efforts or experiments just never got traction because the desire to change wasn't there. Even slow changes over time require commitment.

Slow changes over time are not always an option. Sometimes we face genuine and urgent emergencies, like the woman in my friend's tale above. Walking every day and taking some unhealthy items out of the cupboard might be a start, but it won't save her in time. She needs to change her habits today. I've worked with businesses in similar situations.

The need to change drastically and immediately is understood, but the change doesn't always take place. Sometimes it's because leaders don't know how or where to start. Picking up the phone and calling a consultant or experienced colleague who can help will usually solve that problem. The ones who don't change fail because they choose not to change.

Talk is wasted breath. Without a plan and a commitment to execute the plan,

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nothing will happen. I ran into a tale of success just last week. A legend inside a business with which I have shared much insight is inspirational. My inquiries into the tale lead me to believe it is more truth than exaggeration.

One of the corporation's manufacturing business units was facing bankruptcy. The business unit leader courageously, desperately decided to make a change to try and save the business and committed everyone to it. The business closed and stopped operations. (I'm led to understand the shutdown lasted about two weeks) Customers were notified and communications with corporate channels were stopped. Everyone in the business unit was tasked with changing every process and solving every problem that prevented profitable performance. Nothing else mattered.

When the business re-opened, it performed totally differently. Of course, some changes and adjustments continued to take place, but bankruptcy was avoided, customer satisfaction improved in spite of the sudden shutdown and affronts to corporate culture were forgiven because the changes succeeded.

It is a tale of drastic measures taken at a time of urgent and dramatic need. Because it succeeded, and that business unit continues to succeed, it has become the model of continuous improvement success for the entire corporation.

If you like what you just read, find more of Alan's thoughts at www.bizwizwithin.com. [2]

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