

Climb Out of Your Comfort Zone

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To reach tomorrow's goals, you must escape yesterday's thinking.

Sure, the Grand Canyon is a spectacular, awe-inspiring gap, but it's nothing compared to the Comfort Zone Canyon! The Comfort Zone Canyon is the gap between what you know and what you do.

In today's changing environment, new technologies are learned faster than they can be applied. Why? A lot of people are trapped in their comfort zones. There are obstacles you must overcome to close the gap between what you know and what you do. The challenge is to get people comfortable with stepping out of their current comfort zones and climbing to a new comfort zone!

And there's a precedent. You've made the trip before. Remember when the word processor was brought in to replace electric typewriters? Remember when the CAD system replaced drawing boards and T-squares? Secretaries, engineers and operators resisted with a vengeance and fought hard to avoid using this new technology. But try to go back to this old equipment today. If you think it was hard to make the change before, imagine the resistance to turning back now!

Change Paradigms

You can't mandate that people move out of their current comfort zones to new ones. And you can't simply throw money at the problem and buy a jet-propelled ticket to the next level. It's not that simple. Fortunately, many companies have successfully

moved from the old to the new. They've experienced significant paradigm shifts in how the business is run and how people do their jobs. Much has been learned from these brave "Paradigm Pioneers." Here are some key characteristics that allow companies to jumpstart to a new comfort zone:

1. Explain "Why"

Current business processes simply don't provide the level of performance necessary to compete in today's global market. You and your co-workers need to discuss how competitors, frequently new upstart companies here and abroad, haven't read the rulebook. They don't know all the reasons why it can't be done. Double-digit improvements in everything they do is common. If you continue to do the same old thing, you'll keep getting the same old results. And you won't survive.

2. Make Change Non-Negotiable

You simply don't have the luxury of debating whether or not change is necessary. Successful companies don't vote on it! Key leaders mandate that change is inevitable, not only to survive, but to prosper.

3. Minimize Transition Time

During the transition to new methods, there will be disruption and loss of effectiveness. How can this time be minimized? Climb with your eyes open. Anticipate the inevitable, normal human reactions and become proactive in minimizing them. There will also be some distrust during the transition period. Some people will be looking for proof. There may be confusion about roles, new terminology and suspicion

of hidden agendas. Early successes and open dialogues will help to dispel these roadblocks.

4. Quickly Reach a Consensus Vision

I'm not referring to the Vision Statement that in the annual report or the one that's framed and hanging in the lobby. Those Vision Statements are valuable, but you need to take it to the next level. Everyone in the company must clearly see where you are going ... and have an understanding of what the business will look like and how it will be run. And the vision doesn't have to be achievable or even practical. You're not going to measure the success or failure of reaching the vision. You are going to set goals and measure success by meeting the ones consistent with the vision.

5. Overcome the "Paradigm Effect"

Often, people are stuck in comfort zones because of paradigms that filter new ideas or create doubt that the new ideas will work. Joel Barker points out that, when there's a major paradigm shift, everyone "goes back to zero." The skills and abilities that enabled people to get raises and promotions become worthless.

Many people have not been exposed to new concepts and ideas. For example, the laborer in the field digging a 2-foot deep, 3-foot wide ditch for 100 yards. You ask him, "Why aren't you using a backhoe?" His response, "What's a backhoe?" Give that same laborer a backhoe demonstration and an opportunity to use it and he'll gladly lay down his shovel! The same is true of the purchasing agent, the shop foreman and all

the other people you are asking to make a paradigm shift. Making key people aware of the new ideas is an essential initial investment.

6. Minimize Risk Consequences

Remember the grandiose promises and high expectations from past experiences? Some of the people associated with these aren't even around anymore. Others had their careers demolished when they were associated with failures. This long list of misfires makes people skeptical. So create an environment that allows people to take chances.

7. Focus Resources

"So much to do and so little time" is the complaint I hear most often. How do you get more done? You're not going to add more people ... there are probably too many already. You aren't going to get people to work more hours because they're already working six or seven days a week. The answer is to raise effectiveness. How do you do that? Focus on doing a few things really well. The challenge, of course, is picking the right few.

8. Concentrate on Strategic Goals

"Lack of top management commitment." I've heard it a thousand times. It's a major concern as people think about climbing the ladder to a new comfort zone. The majority of executives are fully committed. Yet the perception that they aren't lingers on. Executive management is responsible for using the total resources of the business to satisfy the customer and maximize shareholder return. You can't be committed to specific projects that don't have a clear connection to achieving the strategic goals of the business.

9. Early Victories

Conventional wisdom encourages us to work on the

big opportunities. Traditionally, the focus has been on solving a few problems for the highest return. But these also represent the biggest risk, take longer to solve, and require more approvals and larger teams of people. Success breeds success. And initially, you need successes. To build momentum, focus on small, not global issues. Concentrate on tasks that can be done in 90 days or less.

10. Think Horizontally

Up until now, you've organized your business by dividing up the duties and assigning people to functional silos. Yet satisfying customers requires high-quality performance in activities linked to business processes. People need to see responsibility as serving internal customers well and supporting internal suppliers. Ask yourself these questions:

- Who are my internal customers?
- What are their expectations?
- Am I meeting their expectations?
- What is the internal customer's perception of the first three?

11. Find Better Yardsticks

As long as measurements and awards are based on silo performance, people will concentrate on doing whatever is necessary to get their department to perform well, even at the expense of the horizontal business process! Maybe you should begin using the internal customer's measurements of their internal suppliers for promotions and raises, rather than the boss's. Depending on the boss to evaluate the individual departments causes people to look vertically, not horizontally.

Climbing Safely

Learning theory tells us that people learn in a very specific way. We learn in spurts of progress, followed by a plateau, followed by another spurt. Think about when you learned to drive. When you first got behind the wheel, driving was a mysterious, complex and dangerous activity. You had to learn when to accelerate, when to brake, when to shift gears and what that red hexagonal sign meant. The first time you started the engine, your worst nightmare was a 4-way stop sign at the top of a steep hill. But as you learned more, practiced more and studied more, driving became a snap. You had reached a new comfort zone.

All you have to do is climb out of that canyon! ✦

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