

## Leadership Barometer 153 Two Views of Change Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD



At the start of a new year, many people make resolutions to change for the future. A couple of months later, most of the resolutions have been set aside. How is change working in your professional and personal life?

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. We should seek to improve our current process just a little bit every day. 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. Sometimes we cannot tell until weeks down the road. The change we make today may be 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 downside with revolutionary change is a high risk of failure, but the payoff is high 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. The technique was called “The Western Roll.” Jumpers would flatten out with stomach down and kick 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. They named the technique “The Fosbury Flop.” 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. In olden days, people used to 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 65 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 have merit. They can be useful when applied in a slightly different way.

## **Conclusion**

It is this combination of revolutionary ideas in conjunction with incremental changes that have the most power for organizations. Seek to improve the products you make and the processes you use. To maximize forward progress, use both incremental and revolutionary change methods.

Bob Whipple, MBA, CPTD, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations