A “Change for the Better”

The Never Ending Battle

By: Todd Wendle

Ever wondered why making “a change for the better” is so difficult? It is not because you do not know what you are doing. It is not due to poor leadership skills. It is not due to any lack of confidence on your part. It is due to the fact that you are engaged in a never ending battle. You are dealing with a whole host of variables anyone of which can derail your “change for the better” in a heartbeat, without warning, and without a hint of sympathy. How well you wage the battle against those variables will determine the difficulty level of your “change for the better”.

“A change for the better” is made up of a combination of ingredients. This combination is governed by a complex equation, recipe if you will, made up entirely of variables. There are no constants. Every single part of the equation is a variable. Every single part. From the change itself to the ingredients to the end result, they are all variables. And the degree of success (or failure) of the “change for the better” ALL depends on how well the variables were bounded, how they were combined, and how quickly decisions could be made when one of them changed.

These ingredients not only must be combined in the correct order, they each must be monitored constantly. They will change without notice. They are called variables for a reason. They vary. They can vary in size, shape, form, amount, duration, etc... There is no warning and no way to determine which of the myriad of ingredients will change. And when they do change, they will alter the end result. And as we all know, end results vary from a complete unmitigated disaster to a screaming success.

If we don’t know what is going to change by how much or even when, what chance of success do we have? The answer lies in the planning and being prepared.

“It wasn’t raining when Noah built his ark.” – Howard Ruff

An excellent rule of thumb is that for any change, the total amount of energy dedicated to the effort should be 80% planning and 20% execution.

This is counterintuitive to the human spirit. We like “DOING”. Sitting around a table planning is construed as “DOING NOTHING”. Have you ever been told, “I don’t care what you do, JUST DO SOMETHING!!”? So what happens? We spend way 80% of our time “DOING” instead of planning. And when you are just “DOING”, it is an unfocused effort with wasted time and wasted money. And when you least expect it, a variable will change and you will not be prepared. And the cycle begins anew. Pull together a hastily formed team, spend as little as time possible coming up with a contingency plan because planning is really doing nothing, and get everyone back to “DOING SOMETHING”. And around and around it goes.
That cycle has to be broken in order to have any chance of achieving “a change for the better” with results that can be declared successful. The variables will never go away. Their impact however can be minimized. An entire profession has been built in the last few years around this very subject. Six Sigma is a project management methodology whose success depends on reducing the amount of variation in a given system wanting to be improved. As the variables affecting a “change for the better”, are bounded to reduce their respective variations, the more predictable the results. The more a variable is allowed to vary, the higher the likelihood the results will be negatively impacted.

The language is important here. As a six sigma project manager, our profession is littered with non-committal words and expressions. I have already used several. Because we KNOW that nothing is constant and everything can and will change, we hedge our predictions on the level of an outcome’s success or even if it will be successful at all. We reduce the risk. We increase the likelihood of success. We plan for contingencies. We hedge our bets. We mitigate. There is even a statistical term/calculation that quantifies variation. That term/calculation is standard deviation. Variation is so abundant in our world, we measure it. And we try, operative word is try, to control it.

By understanding the variables at play in your “change for the better” and how their variability relates to your end result, you become more and more prepared for the time one of them will change. When a person is prepared, they make more informed decisions. They make them faster. They do not panic.

The great thing is, if one can, to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions in one’s “own” or “real” life. The truth is, of course, that what one regards as interruptions are precisely one’s life.” ---C.S. Lewis

Remember as you prepare to “make a change for the better”, that you are more than likely (there is one of those phrases again) to be taking care of many other important and or urgent matters in parallel with your improvement effort. You will be distracted. Something is guaranteed to change. But in this case you will have already thought about the “what ifs”. And you will be prepared. You will be calm, and you will know what to do.

Todd Wendle Biography:

Todd Wendle loves to learn, to teach and to solve problems. This carries over into his personal life as well as professional. He is a member of the National Ski Patrol and during the winter helps solve problems like how to get someone with a broken leg down an ice covered mountain. (Without hurting them more of course)

For almost 30 years, Todd worked for Hewlett Packard and then Agilent Technologies. His expertise is process analysis, design, and improvement in manufacturing, marketing, and the services industry. While working for Agilent Technologies he attended Motorola’s Black Belt Project Management class. He is schooled in lean and six sigma philosophy and applies the principles to everything he does.
He is currently the General Manager of Designer Decal Inc. He has been working for Designer since June 2009 where he has applied his years of Hewlett Packard experiences and education to a much smaller company. He has introduced the company to process improvements, performance metrics, capacity planning, and quality management.

His consulting projects include high volume cell phone assembly lines, production facilities for a dock manufacturer, product design and assembly fixture design.

His goal is to pass on his years of experiences to others such that they can consider doing things differently in order to achieve more of what they value and less of what they do not.

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