

The Five Essential Truths about Change

By Jennifer Selby Long

The holidays had been so good to me that I couldn't fit into my pants. Since I wasn't getting very far on my own, I joined Weight Watchers six weeks ago, and now almost all of my pants fit again.

As an observer of organizational culture and personal change, I also couldn't resist the chance to reflect on why it was that I lost weight, how that change came to be, and what the implications might be for leaders and professionals who need to make your own changes, either personally or throughout your entire organization. Change is change, whether you're unloading the layer of fat around your abdomen or introducing a new business strategy. The fundamental nature of human beings is the same in any setting.

For those unfamiliar with Weight Watchers, a quick primer: Weight Watchers is a weight loss program that is very popular in the United States, in large part, because they have the best record of success in helping people lose weight and keep it off.

Customers are called "members" and pay monthly dues in order to attend weekly 30-minute meetings and utilize on-line tools to help track food consumption and activity levels.

The meetings follow a prescribed, cheerful sequence. Upon arrival, the member checks in, steps on a scale, is congratulated for any weight lost in the prior week, or is told something encouraging if no weight loss occurred ("Better to plateau than gain!" "You gained a pound but it's nothing you can't handle. It's a new week!").

Next comes the meeting itself, with a theme such as Moving More or Using the Buddy System to Stay on Track. During the meeting, the meeting leader hands out awards (usually little stickers) to members who've had significant accomplishments, such as losing their first five pounds or increasing their exercise. The leader always asks who participated in the past week's theme activity and what they did that made them successful. The level of engagement and interaction is very high.

Based on the success of Weight Watchers, my own experience as a leader and consultant, and my reflections on my personal experience, I offer these five absolute truths about change:

Absolute Truth #1: While a reasonable degree of planning is essential, you can think about, analyze, and plan for the change forever, but it won't make you any more successful. Why? Because you have to start doing the change in order to know what's really going to work.

I spent the first two weeks just figuring out what I was willing and unwilling to do to change. I honestly believed I had thought through this thoroughly before joining Weight Watchers, but the truth turned out to be that I couldn't just think through it in my head. I had to be in the experience of changing in order to REALLY know what I was willing to do in order to experience a change.

What I learned about myself by doing instead of just thinking: I'm not willing to give up anything. Nothing. I'll adjust the proportions of my food so that a greater percentage is vegetables and fruits, but, for me personally, there's no point living under the illusion that I'll just give up the dark chocolate, wine, and barbecued chicken (grilled with the skin and fat ON, thank you very much).

So that means that in order to change, I had to step up my exercise. The first two weeks helped me clarify the personal strategy that would work for me, even though a different strategy worked for others.

So often in my consulting practice, a new client wants to do exactly what a current client did, on the assumption that it can be copied to achieve the exact same result. My first responsibility is to deliver the bad news that the reason change management always has to be fully customized (and thus, yes, a larger budget item) is that every organization is unique; therefore, the exact strategy and tactics that worked in one place aren't guaranteed to work at another.

It's only by spending some time in the organization that we can ethically and intelligently narrow down the list of strategies and tactics, and it's only by beginning to execute the change that we know what needs to be adjusted. It's the difference between thinking about it and doing it.

Absolute Truth #2: Change requires you to face yourself and there is no way around that.

I spent the next two weeks pinpointing my own attitudes and behaviors that had been keeping me from the success I wanted.

One attitude was being stuck in the past, which came out in the form of being perplexed about why I gained weight when I wasn't really doing anything differently. In fact, I wasn't exercising as much and – oh, yeah – I'm older, and what worked at 36 doesn't work at 46.

It's easy to get stuck in the past as a leader, too. Are you still relying on the leadership training you attended when you were a new manager? That was probably more focused on the management aspects than the leadership aspects of your role. Still assuming that the 360-degree feedback you received in 2000 should guide your decisions? Maybe a few things have changed since then, and what worked a decade ago won't work now.

I also had to face my inherent blind spots. The biggest is that I have such imprecise physical awareness. When I signed up, I was encouraged to set a goal weight, but all I knew was that I wanted my pants to fit again. I actually had no idea how many pounds that amounted to so I guessed 15. It turns out it's more like 10. As a percentage, I was pretty far off the mark!

Often clients want to focus on turning their blind spots into strengths instead of focusing on honing their strengths, but this is a recipe for failure. It never, ever works. When it comes to your blind spots, it's far better to swallow your pride and use tools to help you manage them. Tools are like training wheels for your blind spots.

In my case, that means relying religiously on the on-line tools to track and adjust the volume of food I consume, and to keep me honest about how much exertion I'm really putting out to burn that food off. While I'm slowly getting better at estimating on my own, it's just more efficient for me to use the tools so I can focus my time and attention elsewhere.

It's not good for your pride to have to rely on tools, but it will make you more effective, and isn't that what really matters?

Absolute Truth #3: Sometimes the system doesn't work as designed, but it works anyway, so enjoy the success and learn from it.

I don't enjoy or learn much in the cheery meetings and am not motivated one way or the other by the weigh-in. Ironically, both Weight Watchers' own studies and independent studies show that these are the two things in the program that are supposed to be most motivational and ensure weight loss.

In my case, I'm continuing to lose weight because I do NOT want to go to any more meetings than I absolutely have to! The very thing designed to be positive reinforcement actually serves as negative reinforcement, and it's working just as well. Weight loss = no more meetings. Motivation enough.

Absolute Truth #4: You must accept the truth about what's inside – you can look at all of the external factors all you want, but if you don't transform your inner self, use your strengths, and set aside your pride, you will never get what you want.

My husband is a naturally thin person. My weight problem began when we started living together and eating dinner together. I had not really owned up to the truth, which is that living with someone who can eat twice as much as you is no excuse for not controlling your own weight.

The clients who are doomed are those who ask me to fix their team or the staff or the boss, but refuse to consider that they themselves will have to accept the truth about their own collusion in blocking the very change they are trying to create. If you can't accept the truth and transform yourself, you will always be incapable of transforming your organization.

Absolute Truth #5: For anything you introduce into a business, there's always a side effect to be managed.

I notice that there is a core at the Weight Watchers meetings, most of whom say they've been there a while. None of them is ever going to reach their weight loss goal, because they don't want to, because they love the meetings. They feel affirmed and cared for. They get to see their Weight Watchers friends. They get to share in the struggle with the community. It's part of their social life. They love bonding with the community through the struggle.

Part of their identity is as an overweight person, and if they succeed in reaching their target weight, they won't feel like they're really part of the community any more – even though Weight Watchers actually encourages their successful members to keep coming to meetings if they enjoy them.

So essentially this creates a weird side effect in that a bunch of people who don't succeed keep hanging around and contributing to the business. They may lower the success rate overall, but they've also become the essential customers who warmly welcome newcomers into the fold during those critical early weeks when they're most likely to drop out. They're supportive and reliable attendees. Their dues provide a steady revenue stream.

Watching how Weight Watchers will handle this is of great interest to me, as you can well imagine. As a leader, you'll always have to strike a balance between your ideal result and the many factors that might contribute to the success of the business, even if they seem perplexing or counterintuitive to you.

Well, gotta run now. Literally. It's time to burn off that cupcake I ate yesterday.

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