

Creating Breakthroughs

If you want to engineer transformational change into your organization, follow these tips.

By Paul Lemberg

Runaway success is never based on incremental improvement. Breakthrough results always “seem” impossible at the time you commit to them. If they seemed reasonable, they wouldn’t qualify as breakthroughs.

Stretch and Grow: Three Traits

Breakthroughs share the following three characteristics:

- **The results aren’t predictable** based on your past performance. If you routinely increase overall productivity by 10% a year, a 40% increase would be a breakthrough.

- **You commit to the results in advance**, without knowing how to accomplish them, and without a plan. This is the exact opposite of the “let’s study this” syndrome.

- **The outcomes are concrete**, measurable, and lead to a new level of performance. A breakthrough will stretch and grow the capabilities of your organization.

Critical Success Tip: The “secret” to producing breakthrough results is putting the cart before the horse. Standard organizational decision-making says, “What do we need? What are we capable of? How can we use our capabilities to produce what we need?” Breakthrough thinking says, “What are we committed to? We believe in the possibility of that commitment. So what can we do next?”

Think for a moment about creating a breakthrough in how you respond to client requests. Instead of “going back and thinking about it,” breakthroughs require you first to commit to act for your client, then figure out how to do so, and

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then take action. This may seem distasteful, even weird — our culture holds strong taboos against making promises we can’t keep. And if you couple this with a common fear of failure, you’ll resist making bold promises and you won’t produce breakthroughs.

Critical Success Tip: Try anything and fail faster! Don’t worry about whether it’s going to work or not. If it might produce the results you want, do it! The more things you implement, the more unworkable approaches you discover and get out of the way, the quicker you’re likely to find a solution that yields the breakthrough. A willingness to implement nontraditional approaches can produce results in record time. Remember, we aren’t talking about problems that need incremental solutions — you already know how to do these. By definition, you don’t know how to produce a breakthrough, so get busy and fail faster.

Bold Promises and Action: Four Steps

There are four steps to creating breakthroughs:

1. **Ask yourself**, “What important thing — which I currently think is impossible — would I commit to, right now, if I actually believed it would be possible?”

2. **Make a bold promise** which commits you to accomplishing that thing. Make sure your promise is specific, measurable, and has a completion date. Also — this is critical — go public with your commitment. Tell concerned people, like your entire organization or your customers.

3. **Invent ways** to deliver on your commitment, and spring into action.

4. **Keep going** until you’re done. A major breakthrough is just inches away. ■

Critical Success Tip: The magic to using the breakthrough technology is this: Make bold promises, publicly. Then, stay in action. Do the next thing, find out if it worked, then do the next thing, find out if that worked, and so on. These steps are all driven by that crazy, breakthrough commitment you made.

Resources

Eadie, Douglas, “Master Change, Or Change Will Master You,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 14, No. 4.

Lemberg, Paul, “If You’re Not Growing, You’re Dying,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 22, No. 5.

Rosenberg, DeAnne, “Eliminating Resistance to Change: The Magic Formula,” *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 10, No. 5.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

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