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Leveraging continuous change principles

1. Make an early decision about whether you'll hang about collecting data or whether you're able to start taking small, smart steps and derive new data on the go.
2. Note of how often you follow the continuous change pathway, compared with taking the 'go slow', collect more facts up-front option.
3. Don't waste too much time on detailed planning, particularly if that delays you taking your next small, smart step. Remember, you are looking to benefit from the emergent opportunities (and benefits) that will arise from your action-focused change process.
4. Be satisfied with setting up a broad statement of outcomes rather than more specific, over-planned goals. Goals often necessarily change in complex environments! You'd be unwise to ignore new information and conditions just because they weren't apparent when you started planning the change.
5. Determine, up-front, how much you are willing to lose. You're then able to take successive small steps knowing that none will push you beyond what you're willing to risk. At worst case, you simply stop when you reach your pre-determined 'line in the sand'.

SUCCEED WITH CONTINUOUS CHANGE

Dealing with a new reality

If you've worked in the change field for any length of time you will probably be aware of Kurt Lewin's three-step change model. Stage one requires 'unfreezing' of the component to be changed. Stage two involves making the change. Finally, in stage three, 're-freezing' occurs and the change is consolidated.

Lewin's change model, devised in the 1930s, worked remarkably well up until the last couple of decades. The model (and others of that era) remained useful as long as the mostly uncomplicated, linear-type business environment persisted. Predictability was generally high and the volume of unknowns was reasonably low. Although always uncomfortable, change was often more considered, programmed, and usually a lot slower.

The business context today is vastly different. First, technologies have meant that you're conducting your business at a much faster pace than you might have done even a decade ago. The pace is increasingly frenetic as more and more people, tethered to their smart communications devices, are continually 'switched on' for business.

Secondly, complexity has soared as a result of the high degree of interconnectivity. It seems almost as if everything is connected in some way with everything else. As a result, you can expect to be increasingly confronted by unanticipated events. They'll also often be non-linear. This means you may get a disproportionately huge response from a small stimulus or maybe a surprisingly minor impact despite a major trigger.

Wanted, a model of continuous change

A recent Harvard Business Review article confirmed that the rate of failed change is still high. The 70% estimate that has been around for a while now is, it seems, still valid. One of the reasons is surely due to the old linear models of change being inadequate for the complex, ever-changing environments that are today's business context.

A model of continuous change has, to date, been conspicuous by its absence. Such a model would need to take account of high levels of fluidity, uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity. It would also need to cope with emergent obstacles and leverage emergent opportunities. Almost unthinkable in a linear model, both obstacles and opportunities might initially be unknown and perhaps even unknowable.

And that's why we think that work in the past few years on serial entrepreneurs, by Professor Saras Sarasvathy (University of Virginia), offers valuable insights. Serial entrepreneurs, she found, have a simple but powerful way of dealing with complexity.

How serial entrepreneurs engage complexity

While much has been written about the traits and even behaviours of entrepreneurs, Sarasvathy conducted unique research on how they think. Thinking, of course, is the precursor to action. Unsurprisingly, a fairly consistent pattern emerged.

Critically, serial entrepreneurs waste little time before they take their first small, smart steps. While uncertainty immobilises most, entrepreneurs take action. This is important for a variety of reasons.

First, they turn intentions into action. Unless acted on, all the intentions in the world are worth nothing. From a brain science perspective, action increases the likelihood that follow through on intention will continue. Filters in the brain also become more alert to relevant opportunities, in a way not available during the intention (procrastination) state.

From a complexity perspective, the entrepreneur's first small step is only to an 'adjacent' position. So it's not likely to be a seriously wild, risky or foolish move. Authors of "Just Start – Take Action", Leonard Schlesinger, Charles Kiefer and Paul Brown, point out that although it's a small move, importantly the action generates a new reality and fresh perspectives. Consider this advantage over those still contemplating action.

Next, having reached a new reality, serial entrepreneurs pause to reflect on what they have learned as a result of taking action. So, instead of delays to gather facts, they do something and gather new facts that emerge from their action. Their final step is intentionally building on the learning to determine their next action and the cycle is repeated.

An outstanding model for continuous change

Although the entrepreneurs focus is on business, they are in fact simultaneously engaging in continuous, incremental change. Instead of betting the house on one big move, they make many smaller, smart moves. Each move is much less risky, simply because it is taken from a 'position' fairly nearby. Think how you might respond to a series of small changes, compared with taking huge leaps of faith which involve lots of uncertainty.

Each of the incremental moves is also an experiment. The entrepreneurs learn (gain) something new each move, regardless of whether the move itself has a positive or negative outcome. Their next action is based on their learning and is not necessarily dependent on the outcome of the prior action. This type of incremental, emergent learning often delivers valuable insights and breakthroughs yet is low risk.

What type of change are you driving and how is that working for you? Our sidebar highlights key actions you can take for better change outcomes.