The Momentum of Change

Many of the inquiries that I get from optometrists across Canada start with the very typical phrase “I have a problem in my practice...”. Then, they go on to explain that revenue is down or flat, or the office morale is terrible, or one of the many other typical problems we all face in our practices. At the core of each problem, and its subsequent solution, is a call for change; however, nothing seems to be feared by so many as the prospect of having to change.

Even though most people understand that change is inevitable, many are compelled to resist. The path of least resistance is to continue doing things the way they have always been done, even when in the long run it could be detrimental. As the saying goes “if the going is easy, then you maybe going downhill”.

Fundamentally, to affect change in your practice you need to change behaviours, both your own and that of your staff. This is not an easy feat. It is immensely difficult because people have to make short-term sacrifices and endure short-term pain in order to realize long-term goals. A great little book that can help you understand the many different subtle aspects of change is Who Moved My Cheese, by Spencer Johnson. We gave a copy of this book to each of our staff members and it proved quite valuable in helping us understand the various personalities and problems that transforming the practice would have to undergo.

The first step in any change process is to make your case for change as clear and frank as possible. Your team needs to know why it is important to you, and your practice that...
this takes place. You should also highlight the likely detrimental outcome if this change does not take place.

From there, communicate clearly and often about your progress. Celebrate even the smallest of wins and don’t let any setbacks derail your efforts. Reward those that help champion your plans and re-energize those that resist. At the outset, schedule time to review and refine your plan with your staff and stick to this timetable.

Everyone wants to know how long it will take to see the transformation. This is a difficult question to answer but often it is several times longer than you think it should. I made changes to our management style in our practice and it took more than two years to see concrete evidence that it was working. These clear ‘eureka moments’ will come but you need to focus more on small daily improvements that will amplify over time.

These ‘miracle moments’ have been compared to the proverbial egg. At the moment the chick breaks out of its shell, it is obvious that change has taken place; however, what is often overlooked are the many small daily changes that take place inside the shell over the preceding weeks.

The good news is that with small sustained changes over a long period of time you will build to a place where change will sustain itself. This is best described as the ‘Flywheel Effect’ by Jim Collins in his book, “Good to Great”, wherein he describes the flywheel:

Now picture a huge, heavy flywheel. It’s a massive, metal disk mounted horizontally on an axle. It’s about 100 feet in diameter, 10 feet thick, and it weighs about 25 tons. That flywheel is your company. Your job is to get that flywheel to move as fast as possible, because momentum—mass times velocity—is what will generate superior economic results over time.

Right now, the flywheel is at a standstill. To get it moving, you make a tremendous effort. You push with all of your might, and finally, you get the flywheel to inch forward. After two or three days of sustained effort, you get the flywheel to complete one entire turn. You keep pushing, and the flywheel begins to move a bit faster. It takes a lot of work, but at last the flywheel makes a second rotation. You keep pushing steadily. It makes three turns, four turns, five, six. With each turn, it moves faster, and then—at some point, you can’t say exactly when—you break through. The momentum of the heavy wheel kicks in your favour: It spins faster and faster, with its own weight propelling it. You aren’t pushing any harder, but the flywheel is accelerating, its momentum building, its speed increasing.

Getting your practice to this point will take effort and time but the end result is well worth it. Many practices plateau or stagnate and can’t seem to push to the next level. The fear of change can be paralyzing. If you don’t learn to embrace change and like it, then you are certainly not going to like it when your practice doesn’t reach its true potential.

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