

Applying 12-Step Strategies to Organizational Change

“Organizations can’t change their culture unless individual employees change their behavior,” says consultant Keith Ferrazzi in this *Harvard Business Review* article, “– and changing behavior is hard.” He and his colleagues have noticed that the change strategies embedded in *Alcoholics Anonymous* and other addiction-treatment programs are quite successful at modifying deeply ingrained behaviors – and can be helpful to leaders who aspire to change their organizations. Here are several such strategies:

- *Nothing happens without a readiness to change.* “You can’t force people to change – you can only help them want to,” says Ferrazzi.
- *Replace old habits with new ones.* For example, a restaurant chain’s managers used to start each day sitting in an office reviewing the previous day’s numbers. Then they tried a different routine – talking to crew members about anything unusual that happened the day before and only then looking at the numbers. This made managers much more aware of what was happening in the restaurant and improved business.
- *Peer support and pressure drive change.* “One of the best ways to change human behavior is to gather people with similar problems together,” says Ferrazzi. Convening peer groups can create mutual generosity, a judgment-free attitude, and accountability, and also increase pressure on reluctant employees to change.
- *Sponsorship deepens commitment and sparks results.* Outside experts are less effective than tapping the knowledge and enthusiasm of internal early-adopters to coach and mentor new employees.
- *Less hierarchy can be a catalyst for change.* Project groups are often more effective when they are led by peers.
- *You are the company you keep.* Smart leaders identify the positive people in their organization and orchestrate work groups and office geography to maximize their impact on others.
- *Continuous introspection is key.* “Early on in the AA program, members examine their past behavior and start trying to change,” says Ferrazzi. Organizations need to follow a similar path, taking a “moral inventory” and acting accordingly.

- *Changes in practice may represent breakthroughs.* It's better to focus on changing practices than mindsets, says Ferrazzi – shift the conversation from guilt, shame, remorse, and resentment to specific behaviors that get results.
- *Acknowledge small wins.* AA emphasizes achievable goals – for example, not drinking that day – and celebrating milestones of sobriety. “Change managers should take a lesson from this practice and find ways for employees to demonstrate and celebrate incremental achievements,” says Ferrazzi.
- *The goal is progress, not perfection.* Change is rarely linear, he says, advocating clients to overcome setbacks and move forward to the next win. “Celebrating the reversal of a relapse can help desired behaviors regain momentum,” he says.

Source: “Managing Change, One Day at a Time” by Keith Ferrazzi in *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2014 (Vol. 92, #7/8, p. 23-25)