

Four steps to make change happen



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I recently coached a manager who had been told for years that he should listen more. It wasn't that he didn't understand what to do. It was that he had never managed to put it into practice. But when I taught him a straightforward technique, he managed it.

What would you really like to change about yourself? Maybe you want to be more assertive during meetings, develop your political savvy or even change something in your personal life – to eat more healthily, for instance.

Whatever you want to change, here's how you do it. I call it the McPlanning technique for short, although in research circles it's called mental contrasting with implementation intention planning.

Step 1: Imagine how it looks and feels

Whatever you want, begin by imagining how it would look and feel if you were to succeed at doing it. Create a mental movie of how you would appear. What would you be saying, doing and feeling. The more vividly you can imagine your words, behaviour and emotions, the greater your chance of turning your goal into reality.

Step 2: Identify the biggest obstacle

Next, consider what might stop you achieving your goal of becoming a better listener, handling stress or whatever else.

Common obstacles include a lack of time or confidence. But only you know what the biggest block stopping you from succeeding in a new behaviour might be.

My client, for example, confessed that the biggest barrier to listening more attentively was probably that he deep-down believed that he was usually right. So the obstacle was his attitude.

Step 3: Ask yourself how likely you are to succeed

Now estimate your probability of achieving your desired behaviour change. Do you think you're 90 per cent likely to do it? Or 68 per cent, or only 23 per cent?

Be honest. Is this something you will do or something that you're probably going to give up on?

If your answer is less than 75 per cent, stop for a moment. You're not setting yourself up to succeed. Narrow your goal and try to do something smaller that you have a higher chance of achieving.

The manager who wanted to improve his listening decided that becoming a better listener all of the time probably wouldn't happen. However, he could work at listening more in Monday morning team meetings. Just for the first half-hour of that meeting, he vowed to absorb more of what others had to say.

Thinking about this newer goal, he decided that yes, he felt 90 per cent confident he could achieve it.

Step 4: Figure out your “if... then...” statement

Finally, turn your goal into an “if... then...” statement. For example, my client decided that during that Monday morning meeting, “if I feel the urge to speak, then I will write down my thought and wait for a gap in the conversation.”

Remember that small steps add up

You can't change everything about yourself overnight. But change one thing at a time and you may find that you can change rather a lot about yourself over a period of months. What will you change first?