

Innovation

Stop Complaining and Do It!

The three phases of any transformation

By [Ken Miller](#) | July 9, 2009



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Last fall, a friend of mine had on one of those colored rubber bracelets representing different causes. His was purple. I knew what most of the colors stood for, but had never encountered a purple one before. He told me, "It's a reminder to stop complaining. Every time I complain I move it to the other wrist. The goal is to keep it on the same wrist for 21 straight days. After that, I should be able to live pretty much complaint free."

Now, I've known this guy for over a decade. He has elevated complaining from a pastime to a serious craft. So I laughed it off and said, "Good luck! You're going to need it."

Twenty-one days without complaining? I couldn't go 21 seconds. And why would you want to? What would there be to talk about? I just didn't get it.

And that's when I got it. All transformation, whether personal or organizational, goes through the same three phases: First you "get it," then you "do it," and then you finally "live it." In complaining about not complaining, I sounded like many of the people in my workshops who just can't get accustomed to a new idea or a big change. They don't get it. And if they don't get it they certainly won't do it, much less live it.

Get it

Management guru Tom Peters says that all significant change begins with mindset. And Albert Einstein said that the significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them. Both men point to the need to elevate our consciousness. That is, before any transformation is possible, we must engage the mind in a new perspective.

This can be as simple as reading a book or hearing someone talk on TV or listening to a friend. Whatever it is, something happens that expands our awareness. Once a new concept is in our consciousness, we go through a strange mix of fact and emotion before we truly "get it." First, the fact-wrestling:

1. *Believing there's a problem.* Any of you familiar with 12-step programs know this is the first step. This is exactly where I was with complaining. Sure, I complained, but who didn't? I thought I wasn't any worse than anybody else. But that's the funny thing about our consciousness: When something gets in, it tends to show up over and over again until we deal with it. The more I told myself that complaining wasn't a big deal, the more I became aware of how much I complained. But it wasn't until I asked other people about my complaining that I realized I truly had a problem.

This is doubly true for organizations. We may think our organization is customer-focused until we actually go ask our customers. We may think we value our employees until we spend time with them and find out we've got a problem. When we accept we may have a problem, we can move on to the next step.

2. *Believing the solution will work.* Just because we admit we need to change doesn't mean we will embrace the solution being presented. Wearing a bracelet will help me stop complaining? How is a purple bracelet going to make the lady at the checkout counter not pay with coupons? How is a purple bracelet going to get my luggage back? Our minds start spinning, usually trying to refute the new idea. We tend not to believe the claims until we see them with our own eyes.

For organizational transformation, one of the most powerful ways to do this is to get in the van and go visit an agency that has been through the transformation. Hanging out with someone who never complains is actually quite inspiring. Visiting an agency that is truly living a mission of service to customers and employees is equally inspiring. After this fact-finding (unless we are in total denial) we accept the solution is possible and then make a critical calculation, which bring us to the next step.

3. *Believing the benefits are worth the effort.* All change requires discomfort and effort. We won't engage in either if we don't believe the goal is worth it. When big effort is required for a small benefit, we meet resist. That's why 8-minute abs programs are now 4-minute abs programs. This is why we usually only make major changes when there is no choice.

After all this factual wrestling, we may still throw all analysis to the wind and make a purely emotional decision: This is for me, or its not. My good friend and colleague Robin Lawton says that when we are ready, no obstacle is too big. When we are not ready, no obstacle is too small. We can't successfully "do it" if we aren't ready.

Do it

There's an old Hindu proverb that says, "To know and not do is still to not know." We can know something conceptually, only when we've actually experienced something can we truly understand it. For individual and organizational change, it's important to understand that you don't always have to have full buy-in before you "do it."

In fact, real transformation often involves a bouncing back and forth between getting it and doing it. We think we have something figured out, we do it, we fail and we go learn some more. The constant interplay between getting it and doing it is what leads to mastery. Too often, we try something, fail, conclude that it doesn't work and then move on to something else. We try 30 different diets. We try the patch, the gum, a bracelet and a support group to stop smoking. We keep searching for the one that will work. As the Dalai Lama said (paraphrased) when asked whether you must abandon your traditional faith to follow his wisdom, "When searching for water, it is better to dig one well a hundred feet deep than to dig a hundred wells a foot deep." Real transformation comes from embracing and mastering an approach with deep conviction.

For me, once I truly realized I needed a complaint-free life, I actually slipped one of those purple bracelets on my right wrist. Again, the goal was to go 21 days without complaining. Each time I complained I was supposed to switch the bracelet to my other wrist. By lunchtime I had nearly broken my bracelet.

After lunch with a waitress who had still not realized her full potential (see how this no complaining stuff makes a difference?), I had to get a new bracelet. I was literally dumfounded with how often I complained and how hard it was going to be to stop.

My first inclination was to call the whole thing off. It's easy for us - as individuals and as organizations - to get derailed when results come at a slow pace. But real transformation can take time. Think of it this way: According to Will Bowen, the creator of the complaint-free bracelets and the [Complaint Free World Program](#), it takes 21 days to form a new habit, to re-wire our brains.

Now translate that into time for your organization. Most organizational change efforts happen in projects. Each project takes three to four months. So one personal day is roughly equivalent to four months organizationally. Multiply that by 21 and you get a rough idea why true transformation requires discipline and dedication.

With all transformation, if we just stick with it, we will get over those initial hurdles and results will start to appear. We'll suddenly realize we really are "doing it." I still remember the first time I went an entire day without complaining (it took me 20 days to get to that point). I was flying to the West Coast and both legs of my flight had been delayed significantly. When we finally took off, the air-conditioning on the plane worked about as well as my seatmate's shower, and the flight attendant brought me the wrong beverage. My normal behavior pattern would have been to complain about all of it and then forecast my baggage getting lost, my hotel being overbooked and whatever other gloom-and-doom scenario my inconvenienced mind could concoct.

But the reality was that I was in a chair in the sky being whisked to a place thousands of miles away to work with a wonderful group of people to solve really important problems. I had nothing to complain about. So I didn't. And four months later I actually made it for 21 straight days. (I would have reached that milestone sooner, but Will Bowen informed me that sarcasm - my second language - was merely complaining with a punch line).

Live it

The final phase of transformation is to actually live it. If we truly get it and we have the discipline to do it, then living it can be the easy part. That doesn't mean we won't occasionally slip back into our old ways. But when we are living it, we slip less and we get back up faster. I still put the purple bracelet on from time to time as a reminder (especially if I am going to visit the in-laws).

You know you are living it when you truly can't imagine going back to the old way. A complaint-free life is amazing. Food tastes better (or at least you tell yourself it does), relationships are stronger, and long lines at the checkout counter are a chance to learn why Jen and Angelina will never get along.

In fact, if you are looking for a way to truly transform your agency, try making it a complaint-free organization, one that practices gratitude for its people, its customers, its challenges and successes. I can think of no better way to live, and no better way to work.

Having said that, there's one final thing to think about when it comes to transformation, and I think it's the most essential element: You can't change someone else. I can't make you stop complaining if you don't want to. Only you can change you. I can help you understand something. I can show you evidence to help you believe it. But only you can make the decision about whether you truly need it.

The same is true for organizational transformation. We can introduce a new perspective to an organization. We can help an organization understand it, believe it and even do it. But it won't go anywhere until the agency truly believes it needs to transform. You can't mandate excellence.