

How a voluntary change now can help ward off trouble later | DeGroote School of Business

[Teal McAteer](#), Associate Professor, Human Resources & Management | Hamilton, Ontario | April 7, 2014

A three part mini-series on voluntary change

Part I – Why we need to deliberately give ourselves a kick in the pants

We await the beginning of a new year with such anticipation, the fictitious promise that it will somehow bring happiness and answers to all of our quandaries, that as the clock strikes midnight we will be changed and our problems with us... We read about new year resolutions and fresh starts, we have this adrenalin that builds and builds; and then, inevitably, falls.

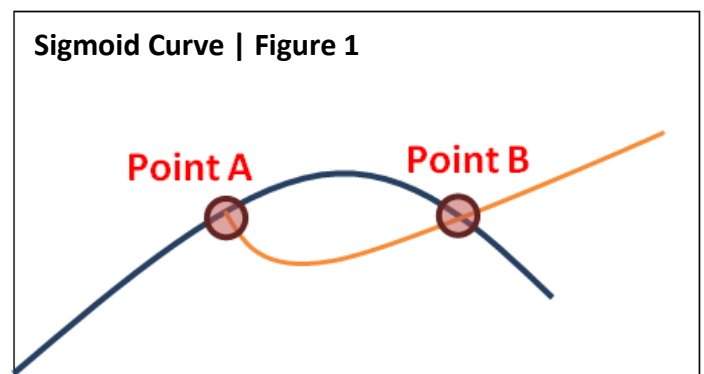
The new year is often full of negativism and self-reflection. It is a difficult time period as we consider the past year and wonder about the course ahead. As we are now arriving at the end of the first quarter, we are beginning to reflect on our progress from our new year resolutions and goals we planned. We had made these with such determination and fortitude, the beliefs that we will make positive changes and follow through with our pledges. However the average, self-reported new year resolution success rate is only 8% according to a study published in 2014 in the Journal of Clinical Psychology¹.

So why is it that we cannot make these changes? In many cases it just feels like there's a mountain in front of us and we simply don't know where to begin. The vast majority of change personally and professionally comes involuntarily, meaning, it happens TO US. So what do we do when this happens? If we're struggling we set out to get support. Be it through self-help books, talking to good friends, or professional assistance. However the point is we've already been "knocked", we're reactive, "help me get through this". **But the trick for going forward is that corporately and personally we learn to give ourselves a kick in the pants. We must learn to deliberately shake things up in order to survive and flourish.**

“It's far harder to jump into something difficult than it is to jump into something that is pleasant.”

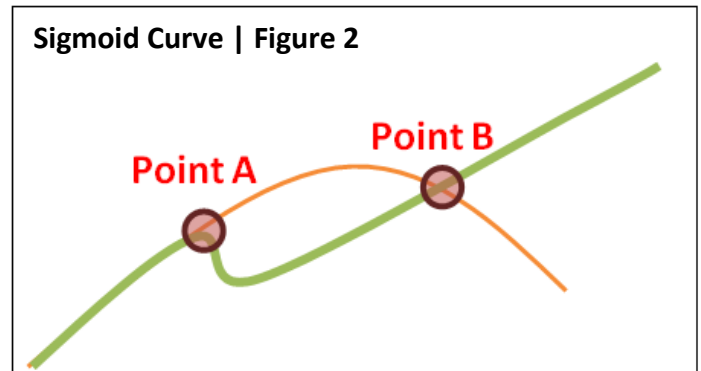
Looking at the Sigmoid curve². At what point do we typically make change?

In Figure 1, the blue line represents us. Here we are going along in life... school, dating, career, marriage, kids, and everything is going great! ...but it isn't always going to be like that. We're naturally evolving people and there are factors that come into play to enforce change. The Sigmoid curve identifies when we as humans and organizations **should** make change versus when we actually **do** make change.



Typically as things are headed upwards (think career, marriage, promotion) we don't make changes, but as they start to head downwards (POINT B) **this** is when we characteristically make change. We wait until things are negative, we wait to be stuck, until we start to see things fall, until the relationships have gone sour, until the business is failing, and generally until things are spiraling downwards before we start to initiate changes.

We realize that, although we know things are going well right now, we also know that they can't always continue in that direction. In figure 2 the green line demonstrates that if we make a change at POINT A, we may hit a bit of a dive initially, but ultimately by being continually evolving, we can catch our next wave and keep building momentum in our success, satisfaction and happiness. Otherwise we run the risk of falling and sinking much lower. For most, we are stuck on "Point B" changes. **We ride the waves instead of catching them.** We wait for the next ball to drop, hitting rock bottom in order to motivate ourselves to make changes personally and professionally.



Do we make the voluntary changes we need or do we wait for the external indicators to make ourselves change. Do you wait for point B?

The world today is a fast paced environment. We have constant technological developments and an influx of options which create a continually changing dynamic in the workplace; the way we execute our jobs and the way we interact with our relationship circles. This creates a leanness of organizations, higher job expectations, and the continual ambition to be on top and a leader in your field. We must constantly be reevaluating ourselves. In order to survive, we must purposely shake things up, we cannot wait, and we must embrace this as a never-ending cycle in our lives, to always be in a state of change.

Join us next month for the second edition of our three part mini-series of "Voluntary Change". PART II – [So how do we recognize when we need to shake things up?](#)

1 <http://www.statisticbrain.com/new-years-resolution-statistics/>

2 [The Age of Paradox](#) by Charles Handy. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1994. xiii, 305 pp.

Join us next month for the second edition of our three part mini-series about "Voluntary Change." [Part II Voluntary Change: Thought processes in anticipation of change](#)



[Dr. Teal McAteer](#) is an Associate Professor in Human Resources and Management at the DeGroot School of Business, McMaster University. Dr. McAteer specializes in the areas of Leadership Development: Change and Stress Management, and Strategic Career Development.

Dr. McAteer maintains her own coaching practice offering change, stress, and career management services to organizations and on an individual basis. Her primary emphasis continues to be in helping people articulate their goals for change in their personal and professional lives, establish specific action steps with time lines, anticipate barriers to change, initiate measures to ensure accountability for actions, and embed progress measures to reach change success. To find out more about Dr. McAteer's coaching sessions, you can contact her at mcateer@mcmaster.ca

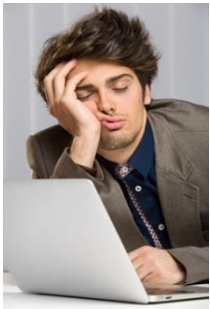
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Part 2 – So how do we recognize *when* we need to shake things up?

For those of you just joining us, this is the second edition of our three part mini-series about “Voluntary Change” featured in Month@DeGroote. Read [Part I – Why we need to deliberately give ourselves a kick in the pants](#).



We tend to only make change when the pain of the present becomes greater than the pain of the unknown. When we are staring at the uncertainty, finally realizing that it is a better option. Why must we wait until this point? What is our personal indicator to make changes? Do we tune in and listen to our “internal compass”? Work may be satisfying — but not challenging, a relationship moderate — but not fulfilling, business and personal relationships toxic — but we’ve not yet recognized the signs. **Everything may seem to be going well but we start to show or feel “symptoms” that change needs to happen.**

We sometimes choose to ignore these warnings and the signs will come to surface in ways that can be behavioral, psychological, or physiological. The body has an amazing way of starting to show evidence. Similarly, corporately your company or employees will produce signs. **Stress gets exhibited in response to not settling a resistance, not being able to end a toxic pattern or shift when you know you need to.** Symptoms and unusual patterns come to light, and while we may not see them, others around us may take notice. Behavioral symptoms include changes in riskiness, aggressiveness, drinking, sleeping, and eating patterns. Psychological symptoms include anxiety, depression, sadness, or worry. Physiological symptoms include chest pains, headaches, skin rashes, dizziness, backaches, and digestive problems. These ‘symptoms’ are brought on if you haven’t made the shift that’s necessary. We sometimes need to be at this point before we realize that something is wrong, to realize we are showing signs that there is an issue that needs to be addressed. If we work backwards we can find the stressor, and therefore identify what needs to be changed.

“ *The body has an amazing way of starting to show evidence. Similarly, corporately your company or employees will produce signs.* ”

When we then start to contemplate making that shift we experience pain and stress; the fear that we may regret our choice or make the wrong decision. This toxic thinking begins to form and thus prevents us from committing to making the required change. Pain and discomfort comes from moving away from your comfort zone and your sense of normality. Not that the current normal is good, or ok. It could in fact be very bad, but none-the-less it is our “normal” or “familiar”. To find our new sense of normal takes us through a journey that for some, can be quite difficult.

“ 80% of the population, once they have the guts to make change, start walking, hit a wall and then turn back” ~ *Just Change It, Peggy Grall.*

80%. Think about that. So only 20% of us can get to the other side? Are you part of that 20%? You must remember that if you are being prompted by yourself internally there must be a reason for it. If we keep circling back to the fork in the road then isn't it time to tune in and take the other path? Your "internal compass" is communicating with you, do you listen? You may not be able to articulate the why, but you can feel it. No person or business is alike; therefore no one has the same journey or the same reasoning for change.

“ *break down, to break through*

But once you feel it and have identified what the necessary change is, it is time to act. We must "break down to break through". This process is absolutely necessary in order to begin our journey to the other side of change — a place that will become our "new normal" filled with potential and opportunities.

Join us next month for the third and final edition of our three part mini-series about "Voluntary Change."
[PART III – The other side of change, and what it takes to get there.](#)



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Lewin's Change Model is a simple demonstration of the process of change. The **first phase** of change is identified as unfreezing our normal or "current state", this means to begin unfreezing our established patterns or views. We do this by challenging existing attitudes, beliefs and values, and then offering alternatives. This is our preparation for change.

The **second phase** is changing, in which we begin our transition to a new state of normal. This is a time of uncertainty and confusion, as we struggle to build a clear understanding of the new thinking and behaviours or practices that will replace the old normal. This is where we may hit road blocks that may make us doubt our decisions and miss the old normal. This is where 80% of us turn back because of the pain of "breaking down to break through" — a process absolutely necessary for successful change.

“ *Life is a succession of crises and moments when we have to rediscover who we are and what we really want.*

– Jean Vanier

In the **final stage** we refreeze our new pattern and establish a new mind-set and a new normal. We have a changed reality and look for ways to capitalize on the new opportunities it offers. This cycle continues as we constantly reevaluate our decisions and environment throughout our journeys. It's simple theories, tried and true, but how do we find the inner motivation to make the step and keep walking?

Change is a never-ending part of organizational and personal life. Managing it effectively is one of our principal challenges. But initiating voluntary change is what will set us apart and keep us ahead. So don't be left behind. Don't resist change and don't settle. Push yourself into an uncomfortable situation, the payoff, could be big.

References:

¹ [The Sage Handbook of Methods in Social Psychology: Lewin's equation](#)



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