



Mel King Institute
for community building

THE PATH TO CHANGE

For a community to improve, individuals, families, neighborhoods, and institutions must all change for the better. While change in any form is extremely difficult and demands great effort, it generally follows a path.

Each step towards change which is taken forcefully strengthens all previous steps and brings the person, group or community closer to the goal. The steps along the path are interconnected and each one reinforces all others. The order in which they occur is not usually a direct line and often, steps need to be readdressed.

The following steps to change are intended as a first draft to be improved upon and developed by community-minded people everywhere. They apply equally to any person, group or community who wants to be better.

1. We must want it.

Whether it is a single person wanting to improve one aspect of his or her life or a whole community wanting to live in a fundamentally stronger place, desire is essential. As with all steps there is a range of how much we want it. Later successful steps often strengthen the desire.

2. We must see it.

A clear vision of the goal is central to realizing change. Many visions start out fuzzy but become stronger as time passes and future steps help clarify it. Whether it is carefully created or not, we all have a vision of how things should be. Without a coherent vision, great action may produce lots of activity, or even change, but not in the direction we seek. Simply put, we need to know where we are going or else we won't know what to do to get there.

3. We must believe it is possible.

Because change at any level is so challenging, it is absolutely essential that we believe it is possible. Without the real belief that it is possible, people will not be able to sustain the necessary commitment and sacrifice required to lasting change. If we really believe it is possible, we will be willing to do what it takes to make it happen. As things go well, our belief is strengthened which fortifies other steps.

4. We must commit to making it happen.

Even before we understand all the changes before us, we must commit to overwhelming them. If we are a sports team which believes it can win a championship, we must commit to that vision. We don't know what injuries will occur or what sacrifices each one will have to make, but we must commit. Once we believe it is possible and we are committed to making it happen, by definition, we are then ready to take the long-term approach in achieving our goal.

5. We must truly understand where we are.

Change means going from one point to another. Not only must we have clear understanding of where we want to go, but also of where we are. We must carefully assess our strengths and our weaknesses. We need to think about what skills we will take the most time to develop. An honest assessment is absolutely critical. If the problem is complex or if a large number of people are involved, this can take a great deal of time and effort.

If we want to win a championship, we need to honestly consider our strengths and weaknesses and how we are going to improve. Just as if we were taking a trip, even if we have decided on our destination, we need to know where we are before we start mapping out a plan for getting there.

6. We must build structures.

Whether it is an individual effort or a city-wide pursuit of a better community, set structures are essential to all of the steps. Structures can help people come together and form a vision. They can help people coordinate action and strengthen commitment. If the goal is to create positive recreational opportunities for young people, a structure, like an organized soccer league, helps coordinate the many things that need to happen for the vision to be achieved. To educate young people, schools are an organized structure. Structures are crucial.

7. We must build up our skills.

A clear vision and iron commitment can result in real change only when we have the necessary skills to make it happen. Often, this can take an incredible amount of time and effort. Unless we are truly committed to achieving the goal, (as opposed to just giving it a shot), we may rush into action without having the proper skills. If all of the previous steps are firmly in place, skills can always be developed. Also, skills are most often learned by doing.

8. We must form a plan for how we are going to achieve our vision.

Once we understand where we are and have a clear vision of where we want to go, we must form a plan for how we are going to get there. Again, we need the proper skills and strong commitment to see our plan to the end. Forming a plan, though, is essential and can take a great deal of time.

9. We must act.

In many ways, every step along the path is action. Building skills is action. Forming a vision is action. Real change is almost always the result of many actions. Each action or series of actions will either bring us closer to the vision or will require us to reform our plan and take a new action. It is crucial, though, that we act in accordance with our plan.

10. Willing to pay the price.

As we start to take action and learn from our efforts, there will be unforeseen obstacles to overcome. Without the strong commitment and the real belief that change is possible, we will not be willing to make the sacrifices, individually nor as a group, which are required to achieve the vision.

~ Mel King