



A Winter Challenge

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area is 1,000,000 or so acres of wilderness that stretch from the northern edge of Minnesota into Canada. Several months ago we planned a January BWCA cross country skiing trip that included staying in a rustic log cabin with wood heat and no plumbing. While it seemed like a good idea at the time, as the departure date approached we noticed a dramatic change in the weather forecast.

The temperature on our first night was predicted to be minus 40 Fahrenheit with daytime highs still well below zero. At this point all the arrangements had been made, so we, and our friends, decided to keep our original plans.

Experiences like this have a way of ejecting us out of our comfortable routines. Our usual way of living is temporarily unavailable, so we learn how to make do in unfamiliar surroundings. The uncomfortable nature of this sort of change has a side benefit; if we are paying attention, we will likely learn something.

Reflecting on this experience (from the warmth of my office), I noticed a few principles about moving through change that worked for me, and are worth considering the next time you begin an important business or personal transition.

Don't Go Alone

If I were making this trip by myself – and no one else even knew I was planning to go – it would have been far easier to let my “self talk” get the best of me. Going public with my plan and talking it through with my traveling companions made a big difference. I knew that I could count on them, since we were all going through this experience together. Most of my resistance was about getting started, which can be the hardest part of any planned change. I found that talking it through with someone other than myself encouraged me to follow through to the next stage.

When you are about to change something important, do you keep it to yourself? Or do you engage trusted colleagues as a way of making a public commitment to action?



Make it Worthwhile

There is something to be said for the challenge of pushing against one's boundaries. The first night I was responsible for keeping the fire going in the wood stove. Around 3 a.m. I decided to step outside and look around. The moon was full and my body cast a dark shadow on the white snow. I took a deep breath and felt the crisp, clean air. I took off my hat and my jacket; I let the cold sink in. It was the lowest actual temperature I'd ever experienced, and I wanted to really feel it. After that night, I moved into new territory in terms of my ability to make friends with the cold.

When you set your sights on change, do you keep it safe and easy? Or do you set challenging goals that push you?

Practice

The first morning we were greeted with double digit below zero temperatures and we wanted to ski. Rather than putting on 15 layers of clothing and heading out on a 10-mile loop, I started slowly. First, a few layers of clothing, a short loop around the lake, then back to the cabin. Each time I returned to the cabin, I noted what was working about my set up, and I made adjustments as needed. . Then I'd head out again, trying a longer loop with my refined setup. This cycle of 'practice – reflect – refine' continued until I had a system that worked well for me. Days later when it was time to leave, I was well prepared to ski the long journey from the cabin to the car.

When moving through a change, it's difficult to try to think your way to the conclusion before you even start. Rather, start slowly (get into the practice), pay attention (reflect on how it is going), keep doing what works and adjust what isn't (make refinements), then try again. Staying in this cycle of 'practice – reflect – refine' will greatly increase the odds of success. It's the thousand small steps that make the difference. We rarely move from start to finish in one great leap.

What approach do you follow when you are engaged in a change process? What works? What needs refinement?

Successfully navigating the challenges of the trip gave me a strong sense of satisfaction. It wasn't comfortable or easy, but the trip was rewarding and invigorating. I returned home with renewed drive and an expanded sense of personal capability.