

Changes, Challenges, and Choices *by Tom Jadin*

There is no doubt that these are challenging times for our state government and for those who work in it. Did you ever notice how some folks eagerly take on new changes, challenges, and choices while others seem to back out, hide out, and burn out during the same times? Research by Suzanne Kobassa shows that the difference between those who thrive and those who “dive” often depends on three characteristics: commitment, control, and challenge.

Those with a sense of commitment are first knowledgeable and aware of who they are, what they believe in, and what goals they have. They are able to articulate these and willing to change them based on new insights. Second, they live their life in congruence with their goals and beliefs. In short, they do what they believe and believe in what they do.

The characteristic of control is defined by the ability to realize that there are some things we have control over and some things we do not. Those who thrive are able to focus their energy on those things they do have control over rather than futilely trying to change things they have no control over.

The third characteristic, challenge, is exemplified by those who possess a certain level of vigor, a willingness to learn and try new things, an ability to work through problems, a knack of finding alternative solutions, and an understanding that “If I fail in what I do, I have not failed in who I am.”

For a sense of challenge we need to cultivate professional “special friends.” We all have one or two special friends in our personal lives with whom we can be perfectly honest and from whom we can get honest feedback. They help us learn about ourselves and become more self-aware. We need to do the same in our professional lives - if not with one special friend, then with a professional support group.

Each day, each week, each month we need to take a brief timeout – a sort of “stretch break” - with the purpose of evaluating how our current activities jive with our current goals. Doing so gives a chance to redirect our activities and be better able to feel that what we are doing is in congruence with what we believe or what we have set for goals.

Though no one should ever have to be lonely, we all need to be alone. Being alone gives us a chance to think about our beliefs, goals, direction, etc. As religions have long recognized the value of meditation, we need to cherish the opportunities to be alone.

If we want to have a better sense of control, then we also need to have a better sense of humor. Humor helps us physiologically, psychologically, and emotionally. We can maintain our sense of humor by seeking out others who have a sense humor. We can force ourselves to do those things which, at the moment we may not feel like doing, but nonetheless, we know we will enjoy. The responsibility to keep the humor batteries charged is ours.

We can maintain a better perception of control by maintaining a better sense of perspective. It is tempting to try and convince ourselves and others that the trying times or issues we are facing are the most catastrophic. Yet, by doing so, we cause ourselves to feel powerless to deal with them. We need to ask ourselves how awful the current situation is compared to how awful it could be.

We have much more control than we realize we do. The key is to use it. We can feel as controlled by our own habits, rituals, routines, etc. as we can by any outside force, yet we have complete control over these. Either use the control or lose the control.

To maintain a sense of challenge we need to maintain our creativity, for creative people cope with trying times much more successfully. We can give ourselves permission to be creative and seek out those who are creative in order to produce a synergistic effect as we build off each other's creativity. By constantly looking for alternatives verses a single "magic" answer we can learn to think of myriad of things we could do instead of merely the one thing we "should" do.

Maintaining a sense of challenge includes a willingness to take risks. We need to practice the skill of risk taking like we do any other skill. Doing so teaches us that the world will not end should we not be completely successful, and when we do succeed that the perceived "danger" is often much greater than the actual danger.

Finally, we can help to maintain our sense of challenge by continuing to learn. Learning is a naturally invigorating experience. It allows us to experience people, places, events, etc. that we have never experienced before.

It is said that mental health is not the absence of problems, but rather the ability to deal with problems. The same holds during these times in state government. Being able to continue coping as individuals and as a government means being able to: 1) maintain a sense of commitment to who we are and what we are doing; 2) maintain a perception of control verses the misperception that we are being controlled; and 3) foster the characteristic of challenge and vigorousness rather than clinging to the status quo.

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