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How to Change Your Life in 7 Steps

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1 START WITH 3%

PERHAPS THE BEST WAY for me to explain the value of my 3% rule is shown by the following story. At 15, I was caught and sent back to the institution I had run away from. My punishment was to dig over a huge space in a walled garden. I had to dig it with a spade, and then break it down with a pitchfork. Then the couch grass roots had to be bundled together and burnt. The size of the area I had to tackle would have made the strongest man cry. It was several weeks' worth of careful digging, forking and picking.

This was beyond the usual punishment. It was a method of torture that I knew they hoped would lead to me failing. They knew it would make me want to run away again. And if that happened I would be in even more trouble. And there might be no way back for me. Even at that age I knew this was a major turning point.

There was no way I could let this task beat me. For the first hour I did something very simple. I divided the ground into squares. That way it looked easier to manage. Working square by square, I would be able to see that I had achieved something and I could measure the amount of work I had done. Knowing that I was getting somewhere would keep me going. The warden came back and watched me as I measured the ground. He shouted at me and asked me what I was doing. I stood to attention and told him. He was speechless, and left!

In the weeks that followed I re-marked the squares so the lines would not fade. I could do two squares between the start of work and the midday break. Sometimes if I worked a bit faster I could get two-and-a-half squares done. I was pleased with myself. I did not let the big piece of ground grind me down. I just took it slowly and, each day, the task became smaller. Sure I may have been crawling along, but the main thing was that it was happening. By breaking down the job into smaller jobs, I had control over it. There is no great mystery to how I did it. I set myself a goal that I could live up to. I started with 3%. Each time I finished a square I added to that 3%. That meant that I was doing the job and I wasn't wearing myself out. I did not set myself up to fail and I showed the staff that I wasn't going to be broken by their punishment. But most importantly, I showed myself.

The despair of depression

There have been times in my life when I have felt truly lost, not just unhappy, but truly out of step with the world. You know those periods when you seem to have a dark cloud following you around, a cloud so heavy it doesn't even allow you to perform the simplest of tasks. You can't find any joy in anything. In fact, just being human is a struggle.

One time I was living on hand-outs from friends and a bit of social security money. Life was grim and there wasn't much reason to get out of bed. But if I wanted to break the pattern I had to start somewhere. So I set myself the smallest of tasks. First I praised myself for getting out of bed. Then I was pleased when I could brush my teeth each morning. (If you've ever been depressed, you'll understand exactly the effort this takes.) The fact that I added shaving to my daily routine was a major step. OK, it might sound stupid but I had to start somewhere. If I had woken up thinking of everything that I needed to do, I would never have got out of bed. Eventually I got to the stage where I could go out and look for a job.

I take exactly the same approach with the homeless. I always tell my employees that you can't expect too much from people who live on the streets. After all, in many cases they have never known a time when things were different so it is natural for them to feel that nothing will ever change. Asking too much of them is just setting them (and you) up to fail. So we don't. Instead we ask them to give us 3%. Just turning up on a regular basis is a huge step for homeless people. Once they've managed that, they are in a position to sell The Big Issue. Then we begin to expect more from them. The next time we see them we ask for 5%. We might say, 'Can you comb your hair before you turn up?' And so it goes. Eventually we expect them to give us 50% and we give them 50%. So they give as much as they take. And likewise we give them only what they need to stand on their own two feet.

Remember - one small step at a time

Watching homeless people change their lives is a joy. It is fantastic seeing people pull themselves out of the gutter. And it happens because we don't steam in asking for the world and pushing them to make big changes in their lives. If we did that, we would get nowhere.

Sometimes nothing happens because people will not accept the thought of starting with 3%. In my position, people come to me with big projects all the time. They want to change the face of society. They want to bring about social justice for everyone and nothing less will do. But when you ask how they'll do it, their plan falls to pieces because they want 100% or nothing. Guess what they end up with. Having dreams is wonderful, but you can't change the world simply because you want to. And we all know Rome wasn't built in a day.

Think back to something you tried to achieve in your life. What happened once you decided on a goal for yourself? I bet that you got excited for a couple of days and then, maybe a week later, you found the study/exercise/savings plan far too difficult. It is likely, too, that even the thought of doing the task was enough to wear you out. Suddenly you had all sorts of excuses as to why you couldn't go for that particular goal. I will also bet that it has happened to you more than once. I call this the 'all start and no finish' problem. You can get started but once things get going you lose your resolve and give up.