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Little Changes Make a Big Difference
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Little changes can make a big difference in so many arenas.

Take, for example, Britain's royal tax authorities who were having difficulty getting people to pay their taxes and to do so on time. They tried the standard scare tactics of reminding people of late charges and interest, but still only 57 percent of what was owed was paid on time. What could be done to encourage people to pay their taxes? This is when they brought in a consulting company called Influence at Work, and the consulting company suggested adding a single sentence to the letter. That one sentence told people of the large number of people who actually paid their taxes on time. What was the result? Instead of only 57 percent of taxes being paid on time, 86 percent of taxes were paid on time. Pretty remarkable, isn't it? One little change that appealed to people's sense of wanting to stand with the crowd and conformance increased by 29%, without spending a single extra British pound in compliance efforts.¹

I would guess that many of you have had some kind of surgery at some point in time. Or perhaps, you have a surgery on the horizon. I am quite certain that you hope the surgery will go well for you. Wouldn't it be nice to know there is one little thing that can improve the odds of nothing going wrong? It's something that really costs hospitals nothing more than a few minutes of time. The simple activity is having the surgical team verbally go through a check list just prior to surgery. In the January 2009 edition of the *New England Journal of Medicine*² a study was released in which surgical centers around the world were asked to complete a checklist just prior to surgery that included asking those in the surgery room things as simple as their name and role as well as a verbal confirmation that the equipment necessary was in the room. What were the results of going through this simple checklist prior to surgery? Postoperative complications went down by 36% and the reduction in mortality rates were similar. A little change, and a change with little cost, but a big difference in results. A difference that might save your life.

Let's consider some other small changes that have made a big difference. Most of you are probably familiar with Play-Doh, the colored modeling compound that kids around the world have been using for more than fifty years. It's so popular that over 100 million cans of the stuff is sold every year, and over two billion cans have been sold since its inception. Just on the basis of sales volume, you would have to say the product is a success. But Play-Doh didn't start out as something to play with it. It was actually invented in the 1930's by a soap manufacturer at the request of Kroger Grocery in order to clean coal residue from wallpaper that occurred in homes with coal-based home heating units. As might be expected the market for the product dropped substantially when homes began to transition to natural gas. That's just when Joe McVicker, the nephew of the fellow who invented the cleaning compound found out that some nursery school kids were using the stuff to make Christmas ornaments. So what did Joe McVicker do? He made a little change to the product. He added color, and then later reduced the amount of salt so that the compound would dry without losing its color. Neither of these changes cost much of anything, but now, with a new name, the product had a whole new market, and a whole new life.³

For many years, Billy Graham was considered the most respected man in America. Graham grew up on a dairy farm outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. Early in his youth, he was actually turned down from membership in a local youth group because he was considered "too worldly." By his later teen years, however, he devoted himself to God and soon found himself preaching to birds, alligators, and cypress stumps to practice for future ministry. That ministry began with small evangelism crusades that had respectable success and were hardly deserving of mention on the national stage. Then in 1949, he began a short series of public meetings in Los Angeles. Response was not unlike other places he had preached, respectable but not impressive. But then a little thing changed everything. William Randolph Hearst, the greatest media mogul of his day, sent a two word message to his reporters. Those two words were "Puff Graham." No one knows why Hearst took such action, not even Graham. The two never met, but once the order was given Graham's name was smattered across newspapers and the series of meetings that Graham scheduled in Los Angeles stretched from three weeks to eight weeks.⁴ The North Carolina boy who couldn't earn membership into a youth group was now on his way to preaching to

some 2.2 billion people through, public venues, radio, and television. All because of two little words. Two little words that made a big difference.

These are but a few stories of little changes, little actions that ended up making a big difference. I am quite certain that you could add to this collection. Undoubtedly, there are those of you who got to where you are today because of some serendipitous event, when some little thing made a big difference in the trajectory of your life.

Since that is the case, I wonder how that might shape how we approach this New Year. If you are among about 50% of American's who make resolutions, there is a good chance that whatever steps you have taken to achieve your resolution are already waning. I suspect this because of what I witness at the gym I frequent. The first couple weeks of January are always crazy. It's hard to find a treadmill and the weight machine I want always seems to be taken just when I want it, but then right about this time things start trending back to normal. The initial resolve begins to fade.

Now, I don't fashion myself as any kind of psychologist who can explain to you why or how this happens, but I do have to wonder if one of the reasons our resolutions often don't come to pass is because we often think we make big changes in order to see big results take place. In some cases I would certainly say big changes are necessary. There are simply situations when something needs to be scrapped completely and a whole new direction needs to be taken. But in other cases, it seems to me that not only are little changes effective in creating big results, they may actually be better at bringing about those results. So with that as my thesis, let me help stir your imagination a bit as to what those changes could be.

Let's suppose that you would like to see yourself be more productive at work this year. You don't necessarily want to spend any more time working you just want to be more productive. Well, perhaps you could change what you do for the last fifteen minutes of each work day. Last fall I shared with you about the importance of reflection,⁵ and one of the studies that I discussed was one in which two comparable groups of employees were tracked. One group was not told to do anything other than complete the work they had before them. The other was told to stop their work fifteen minutes before the normal time they would

leave and reflect on how they could have done better at the things they had done that day. The results indicated that the group that did the reflecting outperformed the control group by 22%. That's a big difference in results with just a little change to your schedule, and it's one that does not take any more time out of your day.

Orr let's consider fitness goals. The number one New Year's resolution for Americans has to do with fitness. And with that resolution often comes new home fitness equipment and gym memberships. Now, if you use those things that's great, but chances are you will be better off simply by making some small changes throughout your day. There are two brothers who attend BridgePoint. One is in his mid-fifties. The other in his early sixties. Both are professionals, one is in oil and gas, the other in the financial industry. One makes sure he gets in a 10-minute swim at the gym every morning. The other does push-ups in his office right when he gets to work in the morning. Both are very lean and every Sunday after our services they are among the first to pick up the 500 or so chairs that get set up in this room each week. They aren't necessary doing big physical routines, but they do the little things along the way that keep them in shape.

Little things also make a difference in our relationships. There is probably some relationship that for you is a bit strained, maybe very strained. It could be with your spouse, or a co-worker, or a neighbor. It might seem as though the chasm is so great it is impossible to bridge. But it is in such situations that perhaps little things become most important. Here's an experiment for you. When you must interact with that person, make it a point to thank them for something. That's right just say thank you for something. I can't promise it will change everything, but I think you might be surprised how simple words like these can go a long way in building a much better relationship.

You know, at BridgePoint we often say that we want to encourage every person we meet to take their next step with Christ. The reason that we say that and not "We want to encourage person to take their next leap across the Grand Canyon" is because we find that most people don't change for the better in big leaps and bounds. It's a step by step process that involves little changes in the way we think and in the things we do. It's that way in business. It's that way with fitness. It's that way in

relationships. And it's that way in our spiritual lives. But those little steps can make a big difference.

- ¹ Steve J. Martin, Noah J. Goldstein, and Robert B. Cialdini, *The Small Big: Small Changes that Spark Big Influence*, 2014, 1-2. *The Small Big* provides countless examples of how little changes can have big influence and is a highly recommended resource.
- ² Alex B. Haynes, et al, "[A Surgical Safety Checklist to Reduce Morbidity and Mortality in a Global Population](#)," *New England Journal of Medicine* (January 29, 2009).
- ³ "[Play-Doh](#)," *Wikipedia*, accessed December, 29, 2014.
- ⁴ William Martin, *A Prophet with Honor: The Billy Graham Story*, 1991, 117-118.
- ⁵ John Hopper, "[Reflection and Performance](#)," November 6, 2014.

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