



Gentle Action: A Better Way

Building a Basis for Action

Typical Approach	Gentle Action Approach
<p><i>Change others</i> We try to bring about change from the outside. In doing so, we focus on trying to change others...</p>	<p><i>Change ourselves</i> . . . rather than realizing that true change begins at home. Gandhi said, "Be the change. . . ." This means that we can only bring change to a system of which we are (or we become) an integral part.</p>
<p><i>Act from a limited perspective</i> We tend to see things from a limited perspective (our own), then try to get others to see them our way and enlist allies to move our own agendas.</p>	<p><i>Act from a comprehensive picture</i> Even when we are part of a system, our perspectives are bound to be limited. To more fully understand all aspects of the system, we need to listen to a variety of other perspectives, then work with others to build a comprehensive picture.</p>
<p><i>Focus on what's wrong</i> We tend to focus more on what's wrong with a system and how we're going to fix it than on understanding how the system actually works.</p>	<p><i>Focus on what's right</i> By immersing ourselves deeply in the workings of the system, we can see what's working well. This helps us think of ways to subtly redirect energies, refine processes, and readjust relationships, to achieve helpful changes with minimal disruption.</p>
<p><i>Wait until we're certain</i> We may not want to proceed because we can never have complete information about a complex system or how it will respond to change.</p>	<p><i>Embrace uncertainty</i> Even as we try to build a thorough understanding of how the system works, we need to become more comfortable with the fact that complete knowledge is unattainable. We can't afford to allow uncertainty to prevent us from acting.</p>

Taking Action

Typical Approach	Gentle Action Approach
<p><i>Use central power</i> We equate power and control with change, so we try to bring lots of power to address big issues.</p>	<p><i>Use grassroots actions</i> But complex systems typically change as the result of small, frequent influences over time. When we recognize this, we realize that even widespread or obstinate problems are within our collective reach.</p>
<p><i>Go for one solution</i> We go for a single solution—one big hammer or magic bullet that will make radical change.</p>	<p><i>Choose many small actions</i> But a complex system depends on many small parts, functioning intricately together. By working in many complementary ways, we can influence multiple aspects or levels of the system at the same time.</p>
<p><i>Stick to definitive plans</i> We make detailed, definitive plans and think we have to stick to them at all costs.</p>	<p><i>Respond flexibly</i> But complex systems are inherently unpredictable— we can't <i>know</i> how they'll respond to our actions. So as we proceed we have to watch carefully to see how our actions are affecting the system, making continual adjustments to our plans as we go along.</p>
<p><i>Expect a dramatic response</i> When we don't see the system changing according to our input, we get discouraged and give up prematurely.</p>	<p><i>Watch patiently for little signs of change</i> Complex systems can be highly resilient and resistant to change. Often a system stays in equilibrium until a "tipping point" is reached. Our actions may seem like they are having no effect. But once critical momentum is achieved, deep-seated changes take root and begin to spread. Understanding this, we'll be less likely to give up when, in fact, success may simply be a matter of sustained effort over time.</p>