The Tao of Lifestyle Growth: Part One

By Roger Landry, MD, MPH

Tao or Dao is a Chinese word signifying the way, path, route or road. Masterpiece will be oﬀering a four-part blog series on “The Tao of Lifestyle Growth,” discussing coaching and its role in senior living. The topics will include kaizen, artful listening, communication and engagement.

*“It’s more about the direction than the distance.”*

—Roger Landry, MD, MPH

# Kaizen: Small Steps

I know you’re motivated to help people age in a better way. You know lifestyle is the key to this goal and that a holistic approach will result in healthy longevity and the compression of morbidity. But…

The “but” is where the rubber meets our road. Our challenge as individuals, organizations and societies is to help people move their lifestyle choices from unexamined habits to enlightened convictions. But when that road is littered with the carnage of good intentions, failure and loss of hope, how can we achieve our mission? How can we warm the soil of healthy lifestyle change with tales of consistent success?

This is the ﬁrst installment of “The Tao of Lifestyle Growth,” a four-part blog series that will address durable lifestyle change. This isn’t a pep talk about ideas or anecdotes. This is about a process, which begins by realizing we are working with humans and not robots or action heroes. Our species is the product of hundreds of thousands of years of hunter-gatherer experience but new to the fast-moving and highly technical world we currently inhabit.

We humans do not excel at big change. Even though we live in a world that values radical, large and brag-worthy change, it is a relatively rare phenomenon to achieve it. Even Olympic athletes get to the medal stand in small, consistent steps. In his remarkable book, One Small Step Can Change Your Life, Dr. Robert Mauer clearly explains why. Big change, whether imposed on us (disease, natural disasters) or self-imposed (lifestyle change) sets oﬀ ancient reactions involving the fear center of the brain, the amygdala, which in turn puts us into survival mode rather than improvement mode. This is the way we are, and most of us cannot “no pain, no gain” our way to durable change.

But don’t throw away out Rocky music, or this blog. Because Dr. Maurer can direct you on a pathway to the medals, to bragable outcomes. He searched high and low for those who achieve lifestyle change that sticks and whose approach to change is the possible for all: a self-sustaining approach that leads to durable change.

He found it in Japan. Ironically, American W. Edwards Deming taught Japanese industry how to recover from World War II. From that approach to organizational change came kaizen, a gentle and eﬀective path to healthy lifestyle change. The core of this philosophy of successful change is small steps, steps small enough to ﬂy under the radar of our amygdala because they are nonthreatening and achievable. These steps by American standards are ridiculously small, but as Shakespeare wrote, “Though she be but little, she is ﬁerce.”

For example, let’s say you want to lose thirty pounds. Ask yourself, what’s the smallest thing I can do toward that goal. First goal, stand for telephone calls and TV ads. Doing that? OK, start walking in place while standing. Doing that? Now start walking one-quarter mile a day. Doing that? Increase your steps 10% a week. It may take you a year, but you WILL lose weight. And your lifestyle will change in a way that will stick and lead you to healthier habits—and your amygdala will never know.

And you will not fail because if you don’t meet a small step goal, it was too big so just ratchet back. Being patient will bolster your conﬁdence in your ability to change, and your competence at lifestyle change. Both will serve you well as a life skill. (For more information on Kaizen, please watch our accompanying video <https://vimeo.com/495212102>).

Kaizen is the ﬁrst principle. How do you assist others to use kaizen to make durable, healthy changes? How do you ensure that residents and team members are feeling supported? In the next blog post in this series, Danielle Palli, a positive psychology, health and wellness coach, will lead us through the ﬁrst step in eﬀective coaching: artful listening.

Palli says, "We need to understand a person's individual aspirations. By asking powerful questions, and through artful listening, we can guide them through a journey of lifestyle growth for healthy longevity.”

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# Discussion Questions:

1. The first step in making a commitment is usually the most difficult. What can you share to assure the prospect they will be supported in their endeavors?
2. Describe kaizen and its value in individual growth.
3. How can you embrace the kaizen approach in the sales and move-in process?
4. What will you do to share the concept of accountability in taking growth steps?

# Sample questions for sales team to use with prospects:

1. If you choose to move to a community, what is one thing you would like to accomplish or learn? What is one small step to make that happen?
2. What are you still curious about when thinking about living in a community setting?
3. What resources do you need to support you in your decision-making process?
4. How can I support you in these areas?