



The Five Truths of Change

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In an age where we can access current information at the touch of a button and the media showers us with images of new and emerging trends; it is easy to see why Americans are obsessed with change. Each year both individuals and companies across this country spend billions of dollars, and untold hours seeking change. This article discusses the foundations of change and five simple truths that will allow for successful and long-lasting behavioral change.

Before diving completely into the world of change, it is important to understand the nature of change and our culture's definition. Webster's dictionary has 7 definitions for the word change, and each can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this article we will define change as, "to cause to become different; alter". This definition supports that change is an altering of states, which co-exist both internally and externally.

The Dynamics of Change

To fully understand change it is important to review psychological research on the subject of change. The systems of change were originally studied and recorded by Kurt Lewin while conducting his work on social systems in the late 1940's. Lewin discusses a theory in which humans and all of our systems attempt to maintain equilibrium within the framework of our environment. When our changing environment causes disequilibrium, our cognitive structures and systems attempt to stabilize and provide meaning. These cognitive structures are comprised of concepts, attitudes and beliefs and are embedded within every situation we encounter. When the environment reaches a state in which we feel constant uneasiness and upheaval we will begin to change. In other words, Lewin understood the inseparable relationship between man and the environment.

Understanding Lewin's theories on change can best be explained with a simple analogy. An individual's behavior, or a set of behaviors, is like an iceberg that is frozen in place along an icy river. As long as the environment (temperature) remains the same, the ice-berg it will remain in place; however, if the temperature changes, the iceberg will move.



When comparing the iceberg analogy with the human system of change, the motivation to change is environmental, not internal. Our environmental changes lead to discomfort, which in turn motivate us to regain a state of homeostasis (freeze-unfreeze-refreeze). Change is the processes of freezing and unfreezing along this hypothetical icy river of life.

Five Truths about Change

Now that we have defined and discussed the theory of change we can outline the truths of change and discuss the reasons why individuals and organizations constantly fail to achieve successful behavioral change. The 5 truths of change are as follows:

1. Change is difficult, but not complicated.

- *Change is a relatively simple process*
- *Expectations of change are often unrealistic*
- *Change happens less often than we think*
- *People who make changes, need an average of six tries before achieving their goals*
- *Most “change” is very short lived*
- *Change happens much more effectively if we understand the change process*

Change at its roots, is a relatively simple process that consists of an internal state becoming congruent with external factors of the environment. One major factor that contributes to unsuccessful change is a result of unrealistic expectations and lack of environmental knowledge and data. These expectations lead to “good will” changes that are too large in scope and inconsistent with the environmental or organizational situations. We do have the capability to change, but we must first understand the change process in its entirety and realize that long lasting change takes more than a motivational speech and strong will.

2. People can’t change themselves just by trying

- *People believe their success is determined by effort, not internal states or rewards*
- *We believe that change is the result of hard work and determination*
- *We think change will be quick and easy if we have the right system*
- *We can’t change by ourselves*
- *We need an environment that rewards our good behaviors and punished our bad*
- *We are social animals, highly affected by our environment and the people in it*



Indeterminate of individual will, without an environment that stimulates states of cognitive dissonance, motivation and change will not be achieved. As Covey states in Principle Centered Leadership, “To understand this, one must recognize that psychologically we can simultaneously hear something and deny it. We have all had the experience in adulthood of finally changing some aspect of ourselves and remembering that we had obtained feedback on the need for this change long before, sometimes even in childhood from our parents. However, because we did not see a way to make the change, we “stored” the disconfirming feedback in our unconscious until we felt safe enough to let it out” (p300). Individuals only listen when they are ready to pay attention and usually are only ready to pay attention because there is an overwhelming gathering of disconfirming data and emotion.

3. People don't change because of knowledge

- *Information and Education do not lead to behavior change*
- *Books and Training Seminars alone do not evoke long term change*
- *Motivational speakers are like meals, you are soon hungry again*
- *Most long term change is initiated by life events, not artificial events*
- *Change is usually a gradual process, with incremental progress*

Like the ice-berg that the environment causes to unfreeze and change, as humans we too must be motivated by the environment to let go. The iceberg does not melt away from its home without many days of sunlight and warmth, nor will it freeze again without the perfect conditions dictating it to do so. We are very much like this ice-berg, and need many days of environmental support to foster change. Humans will not change overnight and no-matter how good a motivational speaker delivers his/her speech, which alone will not produce long term behavioral change. These events can only consist of those hours of sunshine, when combined with continuous environmental demand will eventually promote unfreezing and change.

4. People change because of an uncomfortable internal state

- *We are bothered into change, emotional pain leads to change*
- *Maintaining the motivator (thought or belief) is critical to sustaining long term change*
- *High performers tend to be dissatisfied despite their success*



Think back on the last time that you really changed something about yourself. Was it because you just got tired of living that way? Most people change because they are fed up with something; this something is the uncomfortable state that the present state causes. People usually diet because they cannot bear to look in the mirror anymore or quit smoking because they received bad news from the doctor. These uncomfortable inner states become the motivation to change as they create a negative emotional experience (anxiety, depression). The negative emotional state must take place before the behavior will change.

5. Sustaining long term change is dependent upon the environment

- *The environment must encourage internal discomfort and reward change behavior*
- *When the motivator and rewards leave, the behavior reverts back to the original state*
- *What was once rewarding may lose its saliency*
- *We must continue to find new rewards-motivators*

For change to last, the environment must foster that change. To use our ice-berg analogy, the ice-berg will only remain frozen at its new home down river if conditions warrant. The temperature must remain below freezing, the wind conditions must remain calm, the water level cannot increase, or this change will only be a temporary change. Like the ice-berg, for individuals or organizations to successfully change, the environment must support the specific change and must cause a re-freezing of systems and beliefs. It must also continue to provide the conditions that suit this change behavior.

Effective managers learn how to manipulate the environment in order to change behavior. They know how to make us feel uncomfortable in order to improve our performance. However, they do not create too much discomfort which might lead to a decrease in performance.

Summary

As individuals and organizations struggle to make changes it is important to keep it simple. First, understand the dynamics of change. These dynamics are formed and shaped by interactions with our environments. To master change, and individual or organization must understand that the environment is the catalyst of any long lasting change. Change should take place in the workplace environment, with everyone's participation.



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Second, continue to monitor and measure the change environment. While measuring the external forces that either foster or inhibit change, a successful change can be managed. As a manager, what can you say or do that will lead others to become uncomfortable enough to change their behavior?

Finally, individuals and organizations wishing to change, must realize that change is a process not an event. Change is not a band-aid to a problem and cannot be earned or worked for, but rather it is a result of changing the circumstances that cause the behavior to occur. Change cannot be forced, taught or coerced if it is expected to last. Long-term management development programs are much more effective than the more common two-three day leadership development seminar. Unfortunately, most companies continue to waste precious time and resources on programs that do not lead to change, because they fail to understand what we need to change and develop.