

Do People Change?

By: Dr. David Morrison

During and after my 5G Alignment seminars there were questions about whether people could change and expressions of frustration about people not changing despite training programs. Three facts help understand this frustration: 1. Personalities are relatively stable; 2. People constantly change; and 3. Humans deny change.

Personalities are stable. There is a certain amount of consistency in human beings. That is why we can recognize someone we haven't seen for years.

I saw a man who had been a close friend 45 years before. We had exchanged Christmas cards but had no other contact. He was older, more confident, and looked very distinguished. But after all those years I recognized him without any difficulty. Some things were the same as they were 45 years ago. His low key, engaging, somewhat shy manner was the same. His quiet sense of humor was the same. The way he directly (not offensively) disagreed when someone said something he thought was wrong was the same. There were many more aspects of him that had not changed, enough of them that I recognized him and we fell into some old patterns of interacting with one another.

Does that mean people can't (or won't) change?

People constantly change. On the other hand people are unstable—they never stop changing. Thousands of cells die and are replaced in our bodies every day. New connections and patterns are laid down in our brains constantly; they influence how we think, what we feel, how we perceive the world, inclinations to act, and many other personality functions. So our bodies are constantly changing, which affects our personalities. We also change ourselves beyond physical changes.

Think about how your feelings, thoughts, impulse to act, and relationships change when somebody surprises you by saying "I was just kidding!" How suspicious and guarded do you get if you are with trusted friends, strangers, someone who betrayed you, someone who is evaluating you, someone who wants your support, and on and on? You are different in each of those contexts. How different are you if the person who gives you a dollar is:

- 1 A child who thinks you need money and only has a dollar?
- 2 An adult who owes you \$50.00?
- 3 Someone sneering and suggesting you are cheap?
- 4 Someone still laughing because he thinks the joke you just told is so funny?

Our behavior, feelings, and views of the situation change constantly. People behave, think and feel differently (towards the same stimulus) with friends, lovers, bosses, peers, family, police, when they feel safe or threatened, and so forth. People are constantly changing—sometimes in very profound ways. The question is not "Can people change?" or "How do you get people to change?"

The question is **"Why don't people change when staying the same is not in their best interests!"** Why do they refuse to change when the new way is better? Why do they perform the unnatural act of not changing? This is the crux of the issue. And it can reveal the answer to, "How can I get my people to change to be more aligned?" There are many reasons why people won't change when it is in their best interest to change. Here are a few examples:

- 1 *They don't know if there is commitment to the changes.* For example leadership is conflicted about the changes, leaders give weak support, past changes have been pushed only until it got tough, there are no consequences for changing or resisting, or the leader doesn't believe people will change.
- 2 *They are shamed, humiliated, diminished, treated with contempt and in other ways that cause people to freeze up or lash out.* For example, the change agent gives simplistic suggestions for dealing with change, accuses them of only seeing the glass as half empty, belittles their questions, or describes how defective and wrong the old way was.
- 3 *They don't know how to operate in the new way.* For example, they got training in the technical aspects of the new way but fear they will: look foolish, have to manage emotions (theirs and others'), misunderstand the new way, be unable to establish the relationships they need, have less power than they need to get things done, and so forth.
- 4 *They don't know how to deal with the losses of the old way.* For example, those initiating the changes don't think there will be any losses with the

change and therefore discourage talking about how nice some things were, let alone give support for dealing with the personal losses the change entails.

5 They believe people don't change!

From that partial list you can see that it is often the change agent who keeps people from changing.

People deny change. Finally, to make it more complicated, people deny change in themselves and others. As someone who helps people change, it is common to have their bosses or peers say they didn't change when the changes were clearly made, but now the boss wants different changes. (This is why change agents need to set specific goals and keep good records.) There are numerous examples of this in sociology, psychotherapy, and consulting. If people saw all of the changes taking place in the people around them they would feel insecure. So, saying, "People don't change." is a way to cope with the fact that people change so much.

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