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Getting People to Change Who Don't Want To

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I was surprised to discover a Harris poll that revealed over 90 percent of the people surveyed would change their lives dramatically if they could, and they ranked such intangibles as self-respect, affection, and acceptance higher than status, money, and power (Herding Cats, Warren Bennis). People don't like the way they live, but they don't know what to do about it. They don't know how to change. Those 90 percent would probably be willing to rally behind a leader who could help them make the changes they hunger for.

But let's not overlook an important element of that poll. When I read about it I sat up in my chair and said aloud, "What about the other ten percent." It would be easy to ignore them since they're such a small minority. And while I don't know what, if anything, Harris found out about them, my instincts tell me a few of them will go along with a change, some will walk away, and the remaining few will fight like a junkyard dog.

Jesus Faced It Too

Jesus faced resistance from his disciples (remember Peter saying, "Never Lord!" after Jesus said he was going to Jerusalem to die? Matthew 16:22), from his hometown (Jesus said, "Only in his hometown, among his relatives and in his own house, is a prophet without honor" Mark 6:5), from the masses and from the religious leaders. His ideas were so revolutionary people with insight realized if implemented they would turn the existing order upside down.

Identify the Assumption and Challenge Its Validity

While repeatedly casting the vision Jesus made a habit of challenging people's assumptions. The Pharisees concluded that since Jesus hung around with sinners he must be one himself. Their repugnance for such a man was based on the assumption that God hated sinners and wanted nothing to do with them. Jesus urged them to think differently when he described God as someone who loves sinful people, searches for them and rejoices when they're found (Luke 15).

When the Pharisees challenged Jesus for allowing his disciples to eat without first washing their hands, they assumed God cared more about man made traditions than his commands. That assumption was the basis for an elaborate religious system that allowed the Pharisees to exercise power over people by making sure they conformed to those rules and regulations.

Jesus never explained why he didn't care if his disciples ate without first washing their hands, instead he exposed the frailty of his opponents assumption by pointing out that they regularly violated God's command to honor their parents (Matthew 15:1-9).

The problem Jesus confronted was the one every leader faces. The Pharisees assumed certain things to be true and based on those assumptions they developed a menu of activities and institutions. Before long the activities and assumptions are believed to be valid because nobody ever thinks to challenge the assumptions they're based on. In his thought-provoking book, Lateral Thinking, Edward de Bono points out, "It is historical continuity that maintains most assumptions - not a repeated assessment of their validity."

Rearrange This!

De Bono illustrated his point by asking readers to arrange a selected group of shapes into a single shape. The problem seemed to have no apparent solution. But the readers made an assumption. They assumed the shapes couldn't be altered. But if they had simply changed one of the shapes, they would have been able to arrange them all into one recognizable shape.

De Bono pointed out that if you did such a thing people would accuse you of cheating. The problem was they assumed a certain set of rules - the shapes must remain the same - that makes a solution impossible. Solving the problem involves challenging that assumption.

New Solutions Demand Valid Assumptions

It's an unfortunate fact of life that we all have boundaries that limit how we solve problems. Implementing change demands challenging those assumptions. As a skyscraper needs a stable foundation, so the programs and institutions we develop need valid assumptions to hold them up. Several years ago I read about a man riding in a train reading a newspaper.

As he tried to enjoy a few moments of quiet, two young children repeatedly interrupted him by running up and down the aisle and slapping their hands on the back of the seats. Meanwhile, their father sat calmly in his seat, across from the man reading the newspaper, oblivious to the commotion.

The passenger assumed the father was a terrible parent. Time and again he lowered his newspaper and gave the man a dirty look hoping he would control the children. Finally, when the train stopped and the two men began to leave, the father looked at the passenger and said, "Please forgive me for not controlling my kids. We buried their mother this morning and I'm so shocked and exhausted I just don't have the energy to keep them in check."

Everyone Should Ask “Why? Why? Why?”

That disgruntled passenger instantly changed his judgmental attitude because he understood his assumption was false. Those you wish to influence need you to counter their individual perceptions and the actions that flow from them. You can do that by creating an environment where everyone on the team is encouraged to constantly ask,

"Why?"

"Why do we do things this way?"

"Why can't we do things differently?"

"Why haven't we changed this before?"

When we ask "Why?" we force ourselves, and those on our team, to challenge our fundamental assumptions.

Jesus realized the danger of false assumptions and the conclusions that would flow from them. One day his critics asked him why his disciples ate and drank while John's, and those of the Pharisees, fasted and prayed. Jesus answered their question in a way that reveals a third principle crucial to effectively bringing about change.