

# How People Change

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Over the years I've been interested in this subject of change, and particularly in the question, when people change, what happened? I'm interested in a descriptive picture of what happens to explain why people finally changed. (For this presentation, I'm assuming we're talking about positive change, desirable change.)

The best literature indicates five factors that are usually present in deep change

## **1. The status quo isn't working any more.**

Things have to be pretty bad for us to deeply change. Change is difficult for all of us. Change is scary – we fear the unknown. Change almost always involves loss. Loss is painful. And change upsets our equilibrium. We all want equilibrium, predictability in our lives. Even if the equilibrium we have is dysfunctional, counterproductive, and making everyone unhappy, including us, it's equilibrium. It's a way of life we know. Things have to be pretty bad for us to deeply change.

Now, a question always comes up at this point: So do we as leaders just have to wait for things to get worse and worse until people finally change? No, this is where we talk about leaders creating a sense of urgency. This is both necessary and very tricky, mainly because it's so easy for this to be very manipulative.

## **2. I get a vision of a better future.**

I see new possibilities, a better way. I gain hope! I believe or we believe life can be better.

My brother was addicted to prescription pain medication for 30 years. On April 1, 2009, four years ago, he took his last narcotic for pain. He has a very particular disease process, and he got hooked up with an online support group for Aracnoiditis. He called me on a Sunday morning, told me about a post he got from the leader of the support group. He said, "Finally someone understands my pain, and she believes I can have a better life. And for the first time, I believe I can have a better life too." He had gained hope.

That leads to the third factor present in significant change.

## **3. An emotional relationship is formed.**

There usually is a relational, social dimension to change. In my brother's case, it was the leader of that support group. It may be Bishop Tutu who inspires you. I dare say that if you

are a hardline defender of the US immigration policy, you will change your position when you get to know five families who have gotten caught in the swirl of that policy.

At a personal level, a dynamic theory of change says that I am much more likely to change if I feel unconditionally accepted and understood and safe in a relationship or nest of relationships—the key dynamic, of course, in all support groups.

The apostle John says, “Perfect love casts out fear.” This has huge implications for how leaders lead. One of Martin Luther King’s famous lines was, “Those whom you would change, you must first love.” People are not bludgeoned or guilted or manipulated into deep change. They are loved into it.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *Life Together* says, one of the biggest destroyers of the community of the church is leaders who love their own wish dream for the church more than they love the church.

The emotional, relational, social component to change.

“Those whom we would change, we must first love.”

#### **4. The first steps of change are clear.**

This is the behavioral component to change.

We actually start doing something differently. There is more and more consensus that we practice our way into change more than we think our way into change.

I broke my ankle 3 months ago. I’ve been attacked by a nutrition Nazi who is trying her best to create a sense of urgency in me. She would have me believe that if I don’t eat more fruit and vegetables, in 20 years, I will be 3 inches tall, a mere pile of bone dust . . . or worse. Her attempts to create a sense of urgency have failed.

My wife has a better approach. Duane, you never drink anything but coffee. You like water. Why don’t you just start by drinking three big glasses of water a day, then six? Then add something into your diet that’s good for you. I think that can work.

We usually behave our way into change more than we think our way into change.

In worship most people don’t like new songs, new worship practices right away. They practice new ways, and in time something changes inside.

That leads to the last factor present in significant change—

**5. I reframe my situation.** This is the cognitive dimension to change. Something changes in the way we frame our situation. This is usually the last factor present in significant change.

An example: In leadership theory we talk about the difference between a theory X or theory Y belief system regarding work.

Theory X says employees are naturally lazy and dishonest, hate work, and cannot be trusted, and must be punished or bribed into work.

Theory Y says that, if properly motivated, people like work, that work can be as natural as play, that workers can be trusted if they are first treated with respect, encouraged to think independently, allowed to make decisions and made to feel like an important part of the effort.

That is a different way of seeing the world—a dramatic case of cognitive reframing. But someone doesn't just change overnight from being a theory X leader to being a theory Y leader.

- (Status Quo) 1. Maybe after getting fired three times,
- (Hope) 2. and after actually seeing theory Y work  
and believing maybe there is another way  
(gaining hope a new way is possible)
- (Emotional) 3. having a coach who walks with him,  
and creates the safe space for him to take a  
risk, (the emotional, relational factor)
- (Behavioral) 4. trying some new practices to test Theory Y  
and experiencing some wins, (the behavioral)
- (Cognitive ) 5. . . . maybe over the course of five years,  
someone actually changes  
what she fundamentally believes about  
people and work (the cognitive).

That reframing is usually the end of a huge process of change.

### **Christ and the Spirit in Change**

Finally, I know many of you by now are thinking to yourself, He hasn't talked at all about the role of God and the Holy Spirit in change. To be sure, God is sovereign. God can do and does do what God pleases. The wind blows where it will. And God doesn't need our five steps to change someone.

But fortunately we don't have to choose between an exclusively spiritual explanation of change and the more descriptive view of change I've been offering today. My brother's transformation 4 years ago was totally, I believe, a gift of God's grace, empowered by the Holy Spirit. And these five factors were all present in his change.

As with most things, it's not either or. It's both and.

I end with a quote from John Maxwell that doesn't exactly line up with these five elements, but it's close, and it's pithy. And I think it's particular apt for Christians who understand the Spirit's work in change:

"People change when they hurt enough that they have to change; learn enough that they want to change; receive enough that they are able to change."