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Human Dynamics

Myths and Facts about Change

By Scott Byorum

“Change, nothing stays the same; Unchained, yeah you hit the ground running.” ~ Unchained by Van Halen

Change is often a conundrum. Or, better stated, our approach to change is often a conundrum. We fool ourselves that, if not by design, change happens in the long-term, while we think in the near-term. But the truth is that we are navigating change constantly, even when we are asleep. When we view change as events outside our routine, then our misunderstanding of it leads to maladaptive responses. This start-and-stop conception of change is parable to a traffic jam, rather than the standard free-flowing traffic of a highway.

Could you change if, say, your life was on the line? Believe it or not, odds are against you...nine-to-one. Several studies by Johns Hopkins University show that 90 percent of post-op coronary artery bypass patients had not changed the lifestyle choices that led them to heart disease even two years after surgery. If you approach this from a business standpoint, how are we expected to make sustained organizational changes to enable our businesses and employees to thrive if the odds are against our own individual ability to do so?

The answer is framing. We need to dispel the myths; explore what change isn't and re-affirm the time-tested truths about the nature of change. Your change efforts will fail if you hold any of the following myths to be self-evident:

Myth: Personalities are fixed. No.

Fact: People have tendencies that were developed early in life and reinforced over time, often irrationally. The brain is constantly creating and eliminating neural pathways that reinforce or discard certain beliefs as information is presented to us. You are changing as you read this article, either reinforcing your perspectives, or altering them. Personalities are perspectives, and perspectives can change.

Myth: Change is an event, like a birthday or a wedding. It starts at some point, and then it stops. Wrong.

Fact: While there may be a perceived starting point, like a ribbon-cutting ceremony, events led up to that initiative and even more events led up to those events, as far back as the imagination can fathom. Change is constant. The only thing you might consider an ending is the respect that you lost for yourself and/or others if the change initiative failed. But again, that's just a perception; you've still changed.

Myth: People don't like change. Wrong again.

Fact: People don't like change imposed upon them. They don't want to be parented. But most people actively participate in changes that they have a voice in, and when they know there is a support system to help them make those positive, constructive alterations happen.

Myth: More information will help people change. Nope.

Fact: The right kind of information will help people change. People who smoke and drink heavily because they are anxious and depressed are not likely to be motivated to change when you tell them all the reasons their behavior will greatly reduce their life span. To them, changing their bad habits just means more years of being anxious and depressed. You need to help them visualize a different way of being and help show them the way to get there.

Myth: Change needs to be grand, sweeping, radical.

Fact: If you have come to the stage where that statement is true, then you have probably neglected to address a great many things for a very long time and it might be too late anyway. Change is easier in small, manageable steps where people are not overwhelmed with the enormity of it all and can see the positive effects and rewards more often.

There are two very poignant sayings regarding change. One is that we often can't see the forest for the trees. The other is that the best time to fix a roof is when it's sunny. Navigating towards constructive change that yields positive results means thinking long-term while working near-term...and while dispelling some ill-informed assumptions we may have picked up along the way.

Scott Byorum is the director of business development at Nationwide Real Estate Tax Service, Inc., an author and a certified Instructional Designer. He can be reached at 800-528-7803 or scott@nationwidecompliance.com.