

THE POWER OF POSITIVE SHRINKING

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Each one of us is a therapist. We are continually engaged in trying to modify other people's behavior in various ways. While our training, insight, intuition and styles vary, we promote change as a natural part of our everyday lives.

Take the wife who is busily trying to do a makeover of her husband's temper, longwindedness at social gatherings or tendencies to use sex as a manipulation. Or take a husband trying to do the same. Or parent's attempting to modify the inappropriate behavior of their child. How about sisters, coworkers, roommates, bosses, teachers, etc. all engaged in behavioral modification efforts with those with whom they interact. From a certain angle the world seems all about doing it "my way." In many respects, interpersonal relations is really about influence. Marketing some way of doing something - a value, activity or way to behave and/or respond is a universal occupation.

Unfortunately, most efforts at influencing others are not successful. We come to learn that people's resistance to change rarely changes. Even those who take bold steps forward typically come bouncing back to their starting point as if attached to a bungee

cord. Witness the Oprah diet, the Elvis chemical dependency program or most people you know. Repetition compulsion, as Sigmund warned, rules.

Intriguingly, professional counseling and psychotherapy have a more solid track record of sustained recovery or behavioral change than home based remedies. Conservatively speaking, more than half of the people who invest in at least three months of therapy are able to make significant modifications and sustain them.

It is not only the special knowledge and expertise of the therapist that makes the difference; it is also the special circumstances that surround the process. These hold important implications for all lay or untrained therapists to consider in their efforts to influence others. As we shall see typical approaches may fail because they push people toward resistance and rebellion, rather than in the direction of change.

The bottom line is that therapists tend to approach people positively and supportively, while lay therapists either start from a negative and critical mode or get there very quickly. By positive I do not mean ego mas-

saging, nor do I mean non-confrontive. What I do mean is that the therapist accepts the person as she is and understands that if she were able to make the changes easily or naturally it would have already happened. That the person sits in the therapist's office is testimony to the paralyzed potentials. Everyday folk typically have a hard time seeing it that way. What do we want? Change! When do we want it? Now! Change Now! Change now! Change now!

Such is the chant of the frustrated and angry change agent. Such are the feelings that lead to criticism, ridicule, debasement etc. Such are the techniques that involve yelling, name calling, threatening, eyebrow raising, sarcasm, cursing, etc. Who would change anything, but perhaps their address, under such conditions? Who, except the most masochistic of us, would continue going to and paying for a therapist who used such techniques? Yet, the lay "therapeutic" community uses these very interventions to try to help and heal those whom they care about.

It is not hard to see that such a negative approach will repeatedly fail. Nothing and no one grows under toxic conditions. Acid rain will not

help flowers to bloom. It will cause them to shrink, shrivel and die. So will that which comes from our mouths toward those we are trying to influence. You will not motivate a teen to clean his/her room by yelling about the mess. You will not get an employee to work harder by calling him/her lazy boy or girl. You will not improve your marriage or sexual relationship by ridicule or hostility. In all instances, at best you will get immediate compliance, followed by even worse non-compliance. At worst you will get passive aggressive sabotage or open rebellion. The only way totalitarian techniques work is if you are willing to be totally totalitarian and the other(s) can't escape.

Unconditional positive regard is the main cornerstone in the foundation of all professional therapy. Such acceptance allows defensiveness to recede and self-exploration to proceed. It becomes the "spoonful of sugar" that allows the feedback to be swallowed and digested, thereby stimulating motivational juices. It is, by the way, a natural sweetener rather than a sticky mess of artificial ingredients. Too often, we associate positiveness with indulgence and support with tolerance of the unacceptable. None of these are implied here.

I can accept you and challenge what you say. I can be positive about you and confrontive about your behavior. I can be affirming of how difficult your path to change and still impose consequences for your failure to do so. I can acknowledge the inherent imperfections of your humanness, while still pushing you gently, but solidly forward. I can embrace you as a person under siege and strain while coaching you, Newt Rockney style, to the goal posts. You can do that too, especially with those you love.

Under positive conditions people can heal. Healing is a prerequisite for change or personal growth. Negativity, hostility or other forms of verbal assault add to the emotional cess and make things worse. The problems that prompt modifications evolve from insecurities, feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem and damaged egos. It is easy to see how our heavy handed change agent techniques hurt rather than help; wound rather than extinguish unhealthy, inappropriate behaviors. It is equally easy to see the power of positive shrinking in creating conditions that facilitate changes - not only in others, but in ourselves as well.

The positive approach to helping others modify behavior is synonymous with the 90's trilogy of influence - proactive, empowering networking. These connote the use of constructive, ego enhanced energies to get where we want to go. They reflect the recognition that goal attainment is increased when the path to the goal is approached from a positive direction. Too often, in trying to change others behavior we adopt the other 90's model -- "Just Do It" This may be fine for pulling down rebounds or gold medals, but not so fine for raising consciousness. In the arena of human affairs, positive support promotes a "doing it" result.

Ideally, position your interventions right between Mary Poppins and Michael Jordan. Score points with your feet planted firmly on the solid ground of positive reinforcement. Do it, but do it with sensitivity, compassion and a realistic regard for the complexity of the task. There is no more difficult path in life than that lined with the cobblestones of behavioral change. It is a path which must be walked slowly, skillfully and positively or we shall surely fall and fail. Therein lies the challenge, as well as the power of positive shrinking.