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How many times have you tried to help someone learn, develop, or change in some way? Maybe you worked with a friend who needed to better manage his finances? An employee who struggled to meet expectations? A manager who micromanages? A relative who drinks too much? A child who doesn't do what she is told? A parent who outsourced her self-esteem to social media? How did it go? If you are like most people, helping others change doesn't always work. In fact, it rarely works. Change is difficult. Habits are hard to break.

Yet people do change. People quit smoking and stop drinking. Kids learn to do things right, at least eventually. Employees develop new skills. People learn self-control. What is the difference between the situations that turn out well and those that don't? Is it an increased severity in the consequences that enables people to change? Or does change require a formative experience to grab people's attention? Yes, for sure consequences and formative experiences foster change. There are other change agents as well. However, most are not within your control as a boss, colleague, friend, or coach. You don't control people like you do as a parent of young children. You can't force people to change.

Your lack of control over others might make you give up trying to help them, but don't. There is one change agent you can use even though people aren't beholden to you—your ability to influence. Your ability to persuade people is your source of power and an extremely powerful tool when developed.

There are many dimensions to having the ability to effectively influence other people. Fundamentally, influence involves showing empathy, asking questions, facilitating conversation, building people's motivation, gaining buy in, making change believable, and helping people assume ownership for their course of action. If that sounds complex, it can be. And what most of us know is this—influence isn't simply telling people what to do. Telling doesn't work. But even for people who understand that these elements are the path to influence and change, they miss one subtlety. They miss the fact that change isn't about changing behaviors. It is about changing people's thinking. Behavior change doesn't happen just because people know how to change or have the ability to change. If change were as simple as knowing what to do, people wouldn't fail at their New Year's resolutions. All diets would be effective. Alcoholics Anonymous wouldn't be needed.

Thinking precedes doing. Our mindset precedes our abilities. As the cliché goes, “attitude precedes aptitude.” Or “will precedes skill.” Yet many people who recite these statements still don't know how to apply them. Here are statements from some of my most capable friends, clients, and relatives:

- “I told my husband to stop drinking and he still drinks.”
- “I showed my friend the process to follow and she still doesn't follow it.”
- “We sent my employee to a training class and he still doesn't get it. We're going to have to terminate him.”

How do you change people's thinking so their desired behaviors follow? The simple answer: uncover the real problem before turning your attention to the solution. If in the past you spent 5 minutes on the problem to solve and 55 minutes on the solution, try reversing your approach. Spend 55 minutes on discovering the real problem to solve and 5 minutes on the solution. Ensure you are solving the right problem before solving it.



Coach the Mindset If You Expect to Change the Behavior

In my experience, nine times out of ten, when I first encounter an issue, it is a symptom of something else. If a client says they struggle to delegate, their fundamental issue isn't delegation. It is their fear of letting go, losing control, or perfectionism. If someone says they are a procrastinator, their issue isn't a need to quit putting things off. Their issue is not placing value on planning, not caring much about the impact they have on others, or that they like keeping their options open.

Organizations espouse innovation and put resources in place to enable innovation. But their real issue isn't how to innovate. It's the need for people to be more curious. Managers complain that employees don't get enough done so they focus on processes and procedures that increase efficiency. But often the real issue is that people lack a sense of urgency. In all these situations and most others, the issue preventing the desired behavior is people's mindset. The real problem to solve for is a mindset shift.

People see other's behavior and therefore focus on the behavior. In their defense, that makes sense. They can physically see and observe the behaviors. But what they can't see is the real culprit. People's thinking is what causes the behavior.

If you focus more on people's thinking than on people's doing, good job. You are undoubtedly very influential and successful. But here is one last test. What are your values? What are your organization's values? If your values are behaviors like innovation, action, and teamwork, check yourself. These are behaviors and unless everyone has the mindset that precedes these, you're missing the target. Focusing on people's mindset is a subtle difference.

In the process of addressing underlying issues and being influential, understanding how people think is the start, not the end. The next step is doing something with that understanding. It is shaping people's mindsets. Great coaches, leaders, and parents lead people down a path of discovery that shapes how people think. They cause people to reflect, inspect, question, discover, and understand new ways of viewing their issues and opportunities.

If you know much about psychology, you know that people's mindset includes their conscious and unconscious thinking. Therefore, to change people's thinking, you generally have to also change their subconscious. If you didn't think change was hard already, you may now think it is impossible. Not true. You can bring people's subconscious into their conscious. People's subconscious includes their core beliefs, values, fears, and embedded abilities. Some call these "muscle memory" because they react instinctively. But we humans have a unique feature in our brain that enables us to think about our thinking. We have the ability to question what we do and exercise self-control. We have the ability to override our instincts and deeply held beliefs. For example, even though we might drive our vehicles without conscious thought while having a conversation with someone in the passenger seat, with some intentionality, we can stop and think about how we are driving.

If you want to be more effective at helping others change with an emphasis on shaping their thinking, here are a dozen principles to apply:

1. Prepare for your conversations. Prepare questions that refocus people beyond their symptoms and uncover the mindset(s) preventing their desired behaviors.
2. Start the conversation with the big picture—the desired results. Discuss and agree on the anticipated outcomes and their benefits. Build people's motivation and gain their buy-in for change.
3. Give feedback. Describe the situation. Present facts. Share your observation of the behavior and the impact it had. Be respectful, constructive, objective, and balanced.



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4. Ask for their perspective. Ask them what is going on. Give them a chance to provide their explanation including their need to vent, blame, defend, or clarify.
5. Empathize. Provide a little self-deprecation if applicable to show you can relate to what they are dealing with. Admit that parts of their ecosystem are partially to blame if appropriate.
6. Redirect the conversation to what they have control and influence over. Gain agreement to work on the part of the issue to which they are contributing.
7. Ask questions that guide their self-discovery. Help bring their subconscious beliefs and fears into their conscious. Help them assess their ecosystem to the extent it influences their mindset(s).
8. Use analogies, stories, statistics, and quotes to help them think about their situation from other perspectives.
9. Review the contributing factors and mindsets driving the undesired behaviors. Funnel them down to the ones they agree to address.
10. Brainstorm and agree to new mindsets that could lead to new behaviors.
11. After agreeing to the desired mindsets, identify actions that will help them build the mindsets as well as the skills, knowledge, and abilities they need. If needed, identify changes they need to make in their environment and ways to avoid temptations.
12. Provide ongoing support, encouragement, and accountability as they implement their actions that develop their new mindsets and desired behaviors.

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