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Practicing Active Change

The Nature of Change

Change: It's here. Whether we like it or not, it's the nature of life on earth. We could call change a natural law, a kind of force that affects everything without exception. Wherever we look, we see that everything and everyone is in constant change. From a human standpoint, sometimes that change is wonderful and welcome, sometimes terrible and repugnant. But change is happening, constantly.

As humans we have a choice about how we relate to change. We can engage with change in a conscious, active way, or we can respond reactively. *Active* change is when we choose the best action possible from a multitude of options. We practice being conscious of the whole situation, and our awareness of possibilities is expanded. *Reactive* change is when we don't really choose what to do but act based on our unconscious. "They made me do it—I had no choice!" is reactive change. It happens when we are not aware of the choices we could make, often ending up doing the same thing we have always done, regardless of whether it works or not.

Active change involves a series of conscious, participative steps. When we understand how conscious change happens and the steps involved, we can practice it in a deliberate and intentional way. As we become skilled in the process, we can make the most of each step, resulting in change that is self-directed and strongly rooted.

The Active Change Model

From our experience as consultants and as individuals practicing personal change, as well as from our experience learning from other OD consultants and teachers, we have identified six steps that are involved in all conscious change. We call this six-step process the Active Change Model. It is simple yet elegant and can be used for any kind of change. It is like the paddle for a whitewater raft that makes it possible to navigate raging waters successfully. The paddle works in any kind of water, at any time. Its design might be adapted, but the principle stays the same. In the same way, the Active Change Model is a tool that can effectively guide us through the raging waters of change.

The Active Change Model goes deep into the structure of conscious change. There are many other change models—for example, those by Lewin (1958), Lippitt and Lippitt (1986), Beckhard (1969), French and Bell (1969), Dannemiller (1990), and so forth—but we believe this model is more fundamental than any other. The steps of the Active Change Model are implicit in each of the other models, but no other includes all of the steps specifically, and most don't mention any of the steps. This model can be found as the structural foundation of all conscious change.

However, just as the paddle of a whitewater raft must be consciously and actively applied to be useful, so must this model. Other models are designed for client interventions and can be extremely useful when the intervention follows the expected pattern. Today, however, reinvention is what is current in the business world. Using the Active Change Model as a guide, consultants can custom design their interventions each time.

The authors have a combined total of nearly forty years of practice in the OD field and even more years of commitment to a path of personal change and developing consciousness. During all of this time, we have had a particular interest in how people change. We have studied and practiced various change models and methods, but none seemed to work for every kind of change. This suggested

that there had to be something more to conscious change than was being talked about.

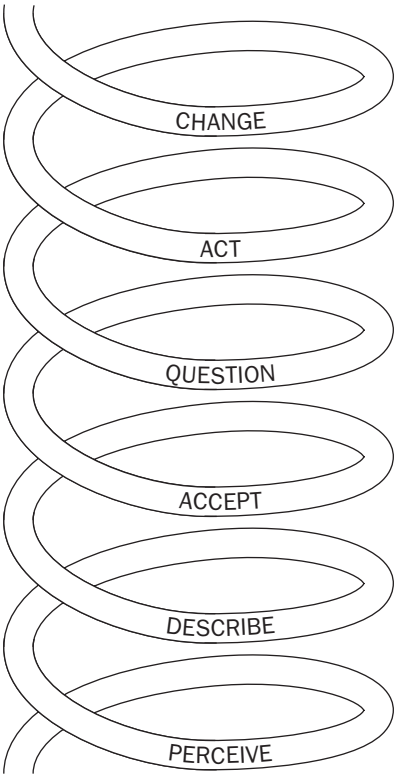
Along the way we met Donna Taylor, an exceptional teacher of methods for personal growth. Her model for change is Acceptance, Responsibility, Control (of the issue), and then Change. We found this model to be effective and have used it personally and professionally, as well as taught it to others. Our model has evolved from hers, revising and expanding on it as we continued to experiment and learn what worked for ourselves and others.

The Active Change Model has now been used extensively over a period of many years, both in our personal change journeys and in our consulting practices, where we applied it as change agents with individuals, groups, and organizations. The model works. It is simple to learn and simple to use. Our clients have noticed that, with practice, it becomes smoothly integrated into the way they change themselves and help others to do so as well.

The process of active change includes six steps. Every active change involves all of these steps in sequential order. A major change may include hundreds or even thousands of complete cycles of these steps. The steps in the model are described below and shown graphically in Figure 1.1.

- *Perceive:* We become aware of something—a situation, person, place, thing, sensation, and so forth.
- *Describe:* We describe what we have perceived fully, using words.
- *Accept:* We accept what we have perceived and described. We make peace with the fact that what we perceive does exist as it is—that regardless of how we feel about it, it is the way it is.
- *Question:* We become a seeker embarking on a quest to investigate all the aspects and possibilities of the situation that we can discover. We use questions as a tool to dig for treasure. Our questions bring answers.
- *Act:* We put the answers to use by doing something different.
- *Change:* When a new action is taken, we have a different experience. This is change. This gives us something new to Perceive, Describe, Accept, Question, and Act on, which brings Change. This process can take place over and over again.

Figure 1.1. The Active Change Model



Here is a simple example. I walk down the sidewalk. I *perceive* something different ahead. I *describe* the perception: There's a puddle on the sidewalk. Puddles consist of water. If I step in the puddle, my shoes will get wet. I don't want my shoes to get wet. I *accept* the situation: The puddle in this sidewalk is a fact. Even though it may annoy me, I don't argue with it—I accept it. I ask a *question*: What should I do to keep my shoes dry? I find an answer: Step around the puddle. I *act*: When I come to the puddle, I *change* my course and step around it. Now I face a new stretch of the sidewalk.

Let's look at each of the steps of the Active Change Model in more detail.

Perceive

"Lou," an internal consultant who works in a large state agency, shared his story with us:

> *"During successive meetings, I noticed that when I presented my ideas to the group, my supervisor took on defensive body language and criticized my ideas."*

In order for us to make a conscious, active change, we must first *perceive* what is happening. The perception may be about myself. It may involve the external, physical world. It may be about someone else's behavior. The situation will still exist, whether we are aware of it or not, but if we aren't aware, we won't be able to respond consciously. Change will still happen; if we try to ignore it, hoping it will go away, the situation may continue to deteriorate, or change might sneak up on and surprise us. We will be affected by the change, but we will have no part in moving the change in the direction we want. For this to happen, we need to see clearly what is going on. This may sound simple, but it is not necessarily easily done.

As humans, we are swimming in a vast ocean of information, both seen and unseen. We are only aware of a tiny fraction of that ocean, even though we are immersed in it. There is much that is present that we don't perceive on a conscious level. Some people are more aware than others. They have developed their ability to perceive and remain aware of more of the world within and around them. But all of us can learn to expand our perceptions to include more of what is happening.

At the heart of expanding our awareness is the practice of changing ourselves into more fully developed human beings. This involves change. We practice conscious, active change of ourselves. When we do this, the amount of what we perceive inside and outside of us multiplies.

As we practice change in ourselves, we may notice that we have *blocks.* Each of us has our own unique perspective from which we view our world. We all have our own blind spots and distortions. These blocks are patterns that we change only by using a conscious strategy. Forewarned of them, we can prepare ourselves to face and surmount them. Studying our blocks is like studying the enemy—if we know them well, we stand a chance of winning.

> *Lou wondered: "How objective am I? Am I having issues with authority figures? Am I projecting my dad onto my supervisor? Am I struggling for control?" Lou searched to find ways that his perception might not be accurate or complete.*

The most basic forms of blocking are *denial, attachment, mindset,* and *projection. Denial* is common in humans and (of course) in their organizations. Denial is when something is happening, but we refuse to acknowledge it. Kotter (1996) states that our belief that we face enough challenges without adding more, combined with our natural tendency to avoid bringing more work on ourselves, leads us to ignore evidence of a large problem if we can get away with it. Naturally, when this happens, *perceiving* what is happening is not on the horizon. This is compounded and made more dangerous when we deny that denial exists!

As consultants, we have found that, if in every situation we assume that important aspects of reality are being denied, we can plan for that denial. If no denial is present—so much the better. But if we assume that denial is present and plan reality checks along the way, we are much more likely to achieve functional and appropriate change without being blindsided by something significant that hasn't been included.

Another common block to accurate perception is *attachment.* We might have a strong attachment to things or people being a certain way. Usually, we become attached to an outcome because we believe it is the most comfortable, safe, or "right" way. If we find our selves engaged in rigid, insistent thinking, we might suspect that we are attached in some way. This is when we may have "tunnel vision" or "blinders" on. When we realize that we are safer with fuller perception, we may choose to let attachments go.

The *mindset* through which we perceive can further cloud our perceptions. It involves our belief systems about the way things work and how life is. Our mindset can determine what we expect to see and, therefore, what we do see. Here, self-knowledge is important. If we are aware of our mindset, we can know the ways in which we are likely to unconsciously limit our perceptions. Then we can learn to compensate or to open our mindset to become more accurate in our perceiving.

Similarly, we may *project* an image of someone onto another person. When we do this, we do not perceive the other person as he or she is but rather as the projected image of someone else. This someone else is often our own self. Or it might be someone from our past that we are still emotionally charged about. Usually, we project our own movie onto another individual when we are reminded of a past event or a part of our own self that we have not resolved.

When Lou asked the questions about how his own blocks might be distorting what he perceived, he risked receiving an unpleasant answer. He said, "I want to be

effective and serve my team the best way I can, so I need to know all I can about what is going on."

Chris Argyris (1962) writes that individuals will deny or distort behaviors to which they cannot easily relate because they perceive those behaviors as a threat to themselves. What we find out may well make us uncomfortable, cause pain, or push us into action we would rather not take. To avoid this experience, we unconsciously distort and limit our perception of what is really happening, not realizing that this eventually results in more pain. Ultimately, we must decide how we wish to live. Comfortable in our delusions? Or, if necessary, uncomfortable with our truth? If we want to free ourselves from blocks and distortions, we need to become more interested in consciousness than in comfort. This requires courage.

How accurately we perceive will determine how well our active change process works. But the process itself will help us find what we need to know to integrate our change fully. We may cycle through the Active Change Model process many times as our perceptions become more accurate. As we overcome our tendency to block perception through denial, attachment, mindset, and projection, cycles of the active change process will go deeper and increase in impact.

Describe

First we *Perceive,* then we *Describe.* These two steps are so close together that they may seem inseparable, but they are distinct. To perceive is to have consciousness of something; to describe is to name what that something is.

When we describe something, we bring language to a perception. Language is how we make sense out of the world. Through the process of describing something, we become more conscious of what we are perceiving. For instance, we may feel air blowing on our face. We might say to ourselves, "The feeling I have is air blowing on my face. It's the wind." Now imagine that we have no words for air, wind, blow, or face. With language, we can describe our perceptions, and this activity makes it possible for us to perceive even more. With language we can ask questions that carry us deeper. "What is wind? What is air? Why does it move? If I can't see it, why does my face feel it?" The questions lead us to further knowledge and the possibility of more change. This comes from the power of naming, which is what it means to describe.

Lou noticed that the behavior of his supervisor was different toward him than toward others. He watched carefully and described to himself what was going on.

Besides his supervisor's defensive body language and criticism of Lou's ideas, Lou noticed other things. He realized that his supervisor looked for opinions from people who were inclined to agree with his own ideas. The more fully Lou described what was happening, the more he noticed.

We use the phrase "now that you mention it" when someone describes something we already know semi-consciously but haven't named. Describing what is in the periphery of our awareness expands our experience, gives us more information, and multiplies the choices we can make.

This naming of what is happening is a fundamental human activity that helps us feel real and connected. Imagine sitting at night in a room with a group of people. Suddenly the lights go out. No one comments on it, and everyone continues on as if nothing has happened. Everyone knows that the lights went out. So why would anyone need to remark on it? Yet, until someone says, "What happened to the lights?" we are tense. Why? Because we don't feel connected until we know we are sharing the same experience.

This is an example of describing to others, but we also need to describe to ourselves. This involves naming where we are right now. It's like knowing the names of the streets where we are standing and then finding where we are on a map. First we name what is happening; then we can locate ourselves on our inner map. Awareness of emotions offers a good example of this. We may perceive that we are having a feeling. When we name that feeling as an emotion, and then the particular emotion that we are experiencing, we can know where we are on the map. Then we can decide what to do next. "I'm feeling something" won't give us enough of a description to help us move on.

Naturally, Lou had some of his own feelings about these events. He said, "I was really angry with him [the supervisor]. How could he behave like that? What a child! And so unprofessional. Even though I had real evidence to back up my ideas, he would pick them apart with anecdotes. My ideas are good! What a waste." In order to minimize his own feelings of anger, Lou could have said to himself, "It's OK; I understand." But that would have been inaccurate and would have kept him from choosing what to do from where he actually was. Acknowledging messy feelings is risky business, but he chose to do it anyway.

When we describe what we perceive, we are making a statement to ourselves or to others. Again, this involves risk. It means that we are exposing ourselves. It

takes courage to describe our perceptions clearly and succinctly in a way that others can understand. And it takes courage to be honest in our descriptions, both to others and to ourselves.

The ability to describe clearly is not something we are born with. It's an acquired skill that we integrate into our habitual practice of consciousness. We can develop this ability by regularly looking around us with a fresh, open attitude and then describing our surroundings in detail. We can do the same thing as we observe an event or interaction. This can take just a few seconds or several minutes. What happens is that we open up more inside and feel more fully connected with our surroundings. This is one technique for becoming more conscious.

Some things that get in the way of clearly describing are poor language skills, lack of knowledge, and lack of self-confidence. Like most blocks, these can be remedied with practice and effort, using the Active Change Model.

Accept

We are what we are. Other people are what they are. Events happen as they do. These things are what they are and remain what they are, regardless of our opinions. Our opinions of whether or not something *should* be the way it already is are irrelevant to the fundamental reality of the situation. The opinions we hold may be relevant to us, but they do not change the way things are.

When we accept what is for what it is, we are not arguing about whether or not something *should* have happened. When we accept ourselves, we are not harassing ourselves about what we should or could have done differently. When we accept others for who they already are, we are not arguing about how they should be different.

Practicing acceptance does not mean giving up discernment. In accepting what is actually the case, we can see that certain actions have certain results. Some of the results are desirable, some not. Acceptance of the way things are enables us to perceive and describe more accurately.

Acceptance also does not mean we can't like it or dislike it. It does not mean that we give up any ideas of change. On the contrary, when we are able to accept, we are able to change in a conscious way. We are functioning in present time, and we can perceive and describe more fully. We can ask, "What do I need to do now?" Without acceptance, we are in reaction. We are busy saying, "This can't be happening. It must be someone's fault. Why me?"

Actually, Lou was very angry about his supervisor's behavior. He felt blocked in meetings and was frustrated all around: "Finally I decided to just let go. I still felt that my supervisor was a jerk, but I realized that the meetings were going to continue to be the way they had been. Since I was tired of feeling criticized, I no longer shared my ideas at the meetings." Lou had accepted the meetings for what they were and had moved on to new behavior. He felt that, under the circumstances, he was making the best choice available to him. He realized and accepted the fact that his clients and colleagues needed and wanted his help. He decided to build stronger connections with his team. But he still judged his supervisor.

Judging is what we are doing when we are *not* accepting. Judgment is when we make a determination that something or someone is right or wrong for being the way it is. We are saying that something that already is should not exist as it does. Or we are saying that something is right just as it is, and that anything different is wrong.

When we indulge in judgment, we may find ourselves entangled in a never-ending struggle for control. Rather than changing in a conscious and active way, we attempt to simply dictate our selves into being different. If we could change in this way, we would all be "perfect" by now. Or we might attempt to control other people or the outcome of events, usually by manipulation or attempted mental will power, which may be successful temporarily. Regardless of the evidence that we cannot actually control these things into changing, we still imagine it's possible and attempt to do so. These attempts will have an effect, but it is a reactive change.

Question

With accurate perception, description, and acceptance, we are prepared to embark on a *quest* of discovery as we take on the role of seeker. A seeker has an attitude of curiosity, openness, and courage. This attitude brings us to generate challenging, creative, and useful questions. When we are seekers, we want to find answers to our questions more than we want comfort.

The *Question* Stage of the Active Change Model is crucial to the whole change cycle. Asking good questions is a powerful skill. It is so important that a later chapter is devoted to it. Here, we will discuss the basics and leave the rest to later.

A good question is one that leads us to an answer that we need. A good question is clearly articulated and clearly states what we are seeking. And when we can-

not think of a good question, any question will do. Questions (and the resulting answers) stimulate us to ask more questions. This questioning cycle can go on endlessly, because there is no limit on the number of possible questions.

Questions Lou asked included the following:

- *"I want to contribute and be effective at my work. Even though I'm not effective at the meetings, what other ways are available to me?"*
- *"How does my supervisor behave outside of meetings?"*
- *"How do other people in the office treat me?"*
- *"How do they respond to my ideas?"*
- *"What can I do that might be more helpful and functional?"*
- *"How am I contributing to my supervisor's behavior?"*

Lou took a risk when he asked these questions. He opened himself up to some answers that might have been unpleasant. There are danger zones in working with questions. Sometimes we only pretend to seek while getting stuck in patterns that stop us from moving forward. Sometimes we become attached to a particular, preconceived answer. Sometimes we feel compelled to find an answer right away, so we snatch the first easy one that comes along and run with it. When we do any of these, we are reacting and controlling, not searching. These behaviors lead to reactive change, and we find ourselves entrusting our fate to luck. The question step of the active change model involves strong skills, self-awareness, and courage.

Act

When we ask questions, we receive answers. When we receive answers, we choose how we will respond, which is to act. When we act, we decide how we will use an answer and then actually do something different based on the new information. We are creating, choosing, and doing something new. This action might be a physical action or a shift inside our selves. A shift inside of our selves is an internal action.

An internal action would go like this: We receive an answer to our question → The answer brings us a new revelation → The new revelation is a new perception → We describe it and accept it → We ask a new question → A new question is an action → A new question is also a change → We have a new revelation → and so on. This might be one of a series of internal cycles.

In the context of the Active Change Model, this internal change must eventually be physically acted on for it to be complete. This means that we not only think differently but act differently. Some may argue this point, but we feel that change is not complete until a physical action that is different is actually undertaken. What is only in our minds is just theory. We can run in endless mind loops. When we experiment in the physical laboratory of our lives, we test the theory. The test will have an observable result. This is the actual change.

> *Lou received lots of answers on his journey. During his investigation, he realized that his clients and colleagues appreciated his support and were open to his ideas. He said, "I realized that I brought my ideas to the meetings without sharing them with anyone beforehand. So I started building my ideas with my colleagues, who not only appreciated them, but they contributed to them. I found out that to be effective I had to build relationships with my colleagues. As I got into teaming, we all developed the ideas cooperatively."*

Here we see an example of conscious action, chosen from a solid foundation of awareness. This kind of action is an experiment and, because it is new, we don't know for sure what will happen. This means that active change involves risk. And here again are places where we can become stuck along the way.

For instance, we can criticize or ignore the answer. Let's say that we ask a question and we receive an answer. We may not like the answer we get, and we might argue with it. "That's a dumb answer!" Or the answer may provoke discomfort and we discount it. Whatever the reason, it is quite possible to become stuck with no change by ignoring the answers. Sometimes we may even stop asking questions when the answers are not convenient. Or we may keep asking questions until we get an answer that we find appealing and in this way prevent conscious change.

Another danger is to keep asking questions forever. We may feel we need to have all the information possible before we can take action. We ask question after question endlessly, in the hope that we will not miss a single scrap of data. The illusion here is that it is possible to know everything, including the outcome of an action, before acting. This goes beyond being well-informed. It's imagining that it is possible to eliminate all risk.

Another way we can become stuck is procrastination. This can include the methods described above as well as avoiding action in other ways. One common form

of procrastination is to wait for someone else to act. Again, we hope to avoid risk, this time by letting someone else be the first to try out the experiment.

Yet another sticking place is to make no decision. Some of us become frozen in the stress of a situation and find it almost impossible to decide on an action. We might forget that not to make a decision is also a decision, but a reactive one. Applying the Active Change Model can help here.

Most of these blocks are about avoiding risk or having things the way we want, functional or not. Leaving things the same way, or clinging to particular outcomes, actually involves risk as well. We sometimes forget that we take risks by letting inaction or reactive action determine the outcome. Inevitably, all choices are risks. When we are unconscious, we can forget this fact.

> *Lou took a risk by asking what he might be contributing to his supervisor's behavior. "I realized that I had engaged in a power struggle with him. I felt indignant and thought he was a fool. I decided to let go of all that. What was the point, after all? I backed off and tried to participate in a flexible way. When he seemed defensive, I responded with calm reassurance, rather than by becoming defensive myself. I kept reminding myself that it's not about personal issues, but about all of us achieving the goals that we share." Lou had accepted his supervisor and was able to move on to his own new behavior. He was now acting differently.*

In the Act Step of the Active Change Model, we are talking about consciously choosing our action, which is different from reaction. Reaction is without questions, participation, or awareness of the meaning of our choices. The kind of active, aware action that we are discussing leads to healthy, functional change.

Change

> *Lou reported that eventually his entire work experience changed as a result of his personal change. "What started happening was that the ideas that we had all developed were presented jointly at meetings. Many of the ideas that I had originated were implemented with success. I was participating more without being stuck on having to come up with the answer all the time."*

Here we see the results of taking all of the steps described above. The change is an *active* change that occurs as a result of a consciously applied process. This is not change that has come from either reactivity or passivity. Change happens as a result

of all of the actions involved in the active change model. It is the result we are seeking.

> *Lou was happier and more productive at his work than he had ever been. And all he did was change himself and his own behavior. And best of all, he told us, "Not only did my supervisor relax and open up more, but now he directly seeks me out to ask my opinions!" Lou changed to a healthier Lou who touched others. And Lou's change opened the way for others to change.*

The initial part of the change is when we *do* the new thing. We go to work in the grand laboratory of life and experiment. This in itself is a change. But the life of the process does not end here. When we do something new and different, we have a new event and a new result. Then we have something new to perceive, which brings us back to the beginning of our cycle. We describe, accept, question, and act, and this brings us again to a change.

Using the Active Change Model

The model is a description of what occurs when we are fully engaged in the change process. We can use this model to practice the skills necessary for conscious change. As we practice, we become more alert to the places that we can become stuck. In twenty years of using this model, we [the authors] have observed that the steps always happen in the order we have described. Again, in any substantial change there will be many cycles—millions, perhaps—that support and lead to the transformation.

In the following chapters, we will apply this model in various ways. The next chapter will focus on changing ourselves by first perceiving, describing, and accepting ourselves in a self-evaluation process, then developing a plan to apply the rest of the model. We feel that the best way to master change is from the inside out. This means that when we practice personal change in a conscious, active way, using this model, change is no longer a theory, but a personal experience. This is when we truly know something.

Personal Change Assessment

1. **Take a moment to recall a time when you successfully made a personal change. Remember as fully as you can the process that you used. Then jot down some answers to the following questions.**

   - Initially, what situation, event, or behavior did you notice?

   - How did you describe this to yourself or others?

   - In what ways did you accept it fully, somewhat, or only a little?

   - What questions did you ask of yourself and others?

   - How did the answers help you?

- What actions did you take?

- What were the results?

- Were there many cycles of change within this change?

2. **Consider for a moment: Is there a personal change that you are attempting at this time, but about which you feel stalled or stuck?**
   - What factors are you aware of so far?

   - How fully have you described them?

- Have you accepted the situation yet, or are you arguing with how "it, you, them" *should* be?

- What questions have you asked? What haven't you asked yet?

- Are the answers helpful?

- What actions have you tried so far?

- Considering the Active Change Model, what step are you in now?