When We Really Want To Bring about Changes in People

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Let us first consider the following three scenarios:

- Our own or someone else's children may be behaving badly, e.g., snatching, hitting, bullying, etc. Since we are naturally concerned about the children's future, we often try to correct the children's behavior using whatever method we think appropriate in the context. But such a "correction" can backfire and aggravate the situation.

- Our relatives may be fighting for an inheritance, openly or in a subtle manner. For most of us, the best inheritance of a deceased person is simply being a part of our lives. Unfortunately, there are people who are more interested in the money or other possessions left behind. It is sad, but we hear such a story over and over, across time and place. We may want such people to be transformed into more spiritual beings.

- Our friends may be suffering from serious illness. While such an event naturally saddens us, that may also be a great opportunity for them to do something they were unable to do earlier, e.g., mending broken relationships. When we notice this, we try to help them, e.g., by giving them a book that might be useful for them. Even if they appreciate the book (and maybe our compassion), they may not even take a look at it. We might think why they are wasting their opportunities.

These scenarios must sound familiar to many of us. Under these and many other circumstances, we would want to bring about changes in other people. However, after trying, we often feel defeated. Could we really do it?

Regardless of what, if we try to force other people to do something, it will definitely backfire. The reason is simple. Nobody wants to be forced to do things. If we can find a potential exception, there may be some other (possibly hidden) reasons for it. For example, if a child appears that she is willing to be forced to do something, she may actually be doing it because of some indirect benefits. The problem with forcing is not limited to person-to-person situations. Be it an organization, an ethnic group, or a country, none of these is willing to be forced to do things against their will. If a group of people are forced, it is quite possible that some sort of violence will break up.

How about advice? In general, we don't want to hear advice of other people when we are not seeking one. Unsolicited advice won't work.   What about if we actually feel like one, e.g.,

expert advice on financial or medical issues? Even when we are actively seeking advice, we already have a certain predisposition and tend to accept only advice that would fit it. So, acceptable advice is more like just affirmation. If the advice goes against our wish, even expert advice would not work.

Just expecting someone else to do something for us seems completely ineffective. Nevertheless, we do this all the time. Of course, an expectation itself is harmless. However, we are often so much attached to the *outcomes* of such an expectation that when the others do not act accordingly, we get upset. This feeling can, in turn, upset the others. From their point of view, it is almost impossible to even realize other people's expectation. There is virtually no chance for us to act according to other people's expectation.

So, especially looking from the other people's perspective, it is quite obvious that none of force, advice, and expectation work in a way we might hope. From time to time, we notice our desires to affect other people. This is natural. However, our desires are just our desires. If we try to implement them using a variety of approaches, it will fail. As long as we understand that these wouldn't work, that is fine. However, in many cases, we are so much attached to the outcome, i.e., the change in other people, this time, we will suffer.

But wait a minute. We also need to see the situation in the other direction. Other people may well be trying to change us. But we may not even be aware of their wish and attempt. Even if we notice that, unless we like the idea, we will actively ignore it, strongly resist it, or violently crush it.

Then, could we really bring about change in others? We don't want to rely on violence. Violence only creates more problems and never solves a problem. How about subtle modes of control, such as punishments and rewards? Although these are extremely common, e.g., among parents, teachers, and employers, these won't work either (Kohn, 1993). The only true driving force for change seems to originate within other people and within ourselves, i.e., intrinsic motivation (Deci, 1995). Intrinsic motivation is not the kind of thing we can instill in other people or within ourselves. It must be there at that moment. Then, the best we can do would be the following. We try not to destroy intrinsic motivation in others and within ourselves. We need to be sensitive to other people's and our intrinsic motivation and do the best to protect it. Furthermore, we need to create environments that are conducive to intrinsic motivation. But wouldn't it be too passive and ineffective? I do not think so. In fact, there are many ways we make good use of intrinsic motivation, as can be seen in the examples below.

In the context of education, Dennison demonstrates an extraordinary capacity of being sensitive to his students' development (1969). Note that his approach strongly contrasts with more conventional approaches to education, i.e., controlling students based on the teachers' (or whoever's) agenda. The free school in New York City which Dennison founded was full of students with various "troubles" in their previous schools. While the teachers there helped their students learn conventional academic materials, the students were never coerced to do so

(as in the spirit of Neill, 1960). In fact, before even starting to do some academic work, the teachers there needed to address the students' well-being first (as in Harrison, 2002). One of the major factors involved was to eliminate the students' fear deeply ingrained during their prior schooling (refer to the point made by Krishnamurti, 1953). The teachers patiently observed the students, identified their needs and interests, and guided them accordingly. At one point, when a fight between two students broke up, Dennison did not "solve" the problem by force. He actually let them continue to fight. His detailed description of this event clearly shows that Dennison is certainly *not* for violence; completely the opposite. Nevertheless, he thought that while closely monitoring the students for safety issues, letting them experience the raw emotions and bodily sensations would heal these wounded students. And indeed, this event was a turning point for a dramatic change in the students. They have most likely realized that their futures are in *their own* hands, not dictated by others.

Another, more recent example in education is John Hunter (2013). He is the creator of *World Peace Game*, where officials of four imaginary countries tackle fifty (!) complex, interlocking problems, along with homeless tribes and international organizations. Once this attractive but extremely challenging context is set, he skillfully guides the students without telling them what to do. Even when he felt that he was making a mistake of not instructing them properly, he trusts the students' collective wisdom and patiently waits for a meaningful outcome. And in the end, his students always came up with a solution after overcoming confusion and frustration.

In the context of counseling and therapy, Rogers describes an approach called "active listening" (e.g., Rogers and Farson, 1987), based on his humanistic approach (Rogers, 1961). Under normal circumstances filled with judgment and demands, patients tend to be defensive and elusive. However, by listening to the patient empathetically and non-judgmentally, the therapist will be able to build a rapport necessary for the patient to trust and open up to the therapist with honesty. This way, both the therapist and the patient will be able to recognize the patient's genuine and underlying emotions and feelings. With this recognition, the patient will be able to grasp the reality and that can lead to a change. In other words, people won't change unless underlying obstacles are removed, e.g., by the process of active listening.

Active listening is not limited to patient-therapist relationships. It applies to various other people-oriented functions including customer service and crisis hotline volunteers. In fact, to almost all conversations, we can apply "active listening." As we develop this skill, we can even apply the same attitude to actively listen to *ourselves*, as will be seen shortly.

In the context of parenting, Arbinger Institute/Company proposes an approach called "parenting pyramid" (1998). When a parent wants to "correct" the behavior of her child, the parent cannot *forcefully* fix the behavior, as it would backfire. The parent needs to "teach" the child somehow. However, to be able to "teach," the parent needs to be in good relationship with her spouse and other adults in the environment. To be in a good relationship with her spouse and others, she must be in good shape herself, emotionally and cognitively. In other words, unless parents truly understand themselves and improve their attitudes and behaviors, it

would be impossible to "correct" their children.

We can extend the discussion to parenting very young children, including infants. According to attachment theory, pioneered by Bowlby and Ainsworth (historical overview by Karen, 1994), the development of desirable "attachment" patterns depends on how the parent/caregiver responds to the child, regardless of what the child does. If a parent tries to "correct" her child, e.g., based on her expectation, the child will grow to be insecure. If the parent "actively listens" to the child, not at the auditory level, but at the physical/biological level, the child will become securely attached to the parent. In a sense, active listening can be applied to human interactions at all levels.

An analogous point can be observed on the topic of forgiveness. Warner, the founder of Arbinger Institute, argues that true forgiveness is not to "forgive" the offender (as if we were a superior) but to forgive *ourselves* for blaming the offenders (2001). That is, as long as we blame others for whatever happened, including really horrible things, we will never be at peace and never be able to change.

In the area of trauma and addition recovery, it is often perceived that patients are powerless and that someone else (including gods) must be in charge. Even here, however, experts are discovering that one of the essential ingredients in a successful recovery process is patient's self-directed attempt to get better (van der Kolk, 2014; Maté, 2010; Peele, et al., 1991). Also to help people with mental illness, caregivers and family would need the skills of active listening , addressing the intrinsic motivation of the patients, and develop a plan collaboratively (Amador, 2012). In the school and other contexts, when there are children's behavior issues, teachers and counselors would normally try to control them badly. However, a better approach seems to actively involve children in the problem solving process (Ross Greene, 2008). According to Greene, children "already know how we want them to behave" and "already want to behave the right way." So, in these additional cases as well, the best thing would be to change our attitude and adopt the most appropriate method.

The approach discussed so far can be dramatically realized when we attend to a person who is going to die. We often feel powerless. In many cases, the dying person still clings to her life and cannot let go of it. In such a situation, we always hope for a better turn in terms of the health condition but it is also more painful if we are attached to such a hope and cannot let go of the possible loss. If the situation is truly grave, we cannot really change the process of dying. In such a case, the only "healing" may be in the relationship between the involved people. Rather than trying to change the dying person, it is often the change in the surrounding people that could make it better for the dying. The process of dying can even be inspiring for the dying and others (Levine, 1982).

In the end, we can make the best out of the loss by understanding the limited span of our lives and not attaching to immortality. In many cases, the dying person (especially a child, according to Levine, 1982) worries more about the caregivers than themselves. Then, the change in the

caregivers would certainly affect the dying. This kind of situation will make us realize that we cannot really change others *as we would normally think*. For the dying, it is best if we change.

Being with a dying person would inevitably make us realize that we too will die at some point; normally, we just don't know when this will happen. Then, our attitude toward dying people would translate to our attitude toward ourselves, who are also dying. This again suggests that we cannot really be changed by others (unless the others' change are already positively affecting us, as discussed above). We need to change from within. That is, we are the driving force behind a change, as well as the subject of change.

Recently, I watched a movie film, "The Soloist," which is based on a true story. In the film, the newspaper reporter, Steve Lopez, struggles to help the talented, schizophrenic, and homeless musician, Nathaniel Ayers, gain an opportunity to become "successful" in the usual sense. By writing a column about Ayers, Lopez helps Ayers to receive a cello as a gift, a place to live, an opportunity to perform, etc. But things do not go so well as Lopez expects; he gets extremely frustrated. We could even see that the "normality" of Lopez (conditioned by the conventional social values) appears abnormal and the "abnormality" of Ayers (schizophrenia) appears normal. In a sense, if the society is pathological, a normal person may not appear "normal" in that society.

In the end, Lopez realizes that what Ayers really wants is just his friendship and not paternalistic "charity."   With this realization, Lopez becomes Ayers' real friend.   This story clearly demonstrates what we have been discussing. A positive change emerged when Lopez himself, the person who was trying to change Ayers, changed. To me, the story is about Lopez who was healed first, which also helped Ayers.

As we have seen so far, the best way to bring about changes in other people seems to be our own change. As active listening is to attend the speaker without judgment, if we apply the same attitude to ourselves, that can be the most effective tool for us to change, which can in turn bring about changes in others. And the attitude of applying active listening to ourselves is basically the attitude of mindfulness. If we are mindful, we are in fact "meditating" albeit in a very informal way (relevant discussion in Gunaratana, 2002).

Through mindfulness, we can become aware of our attachments to various things, i.e., materials, feelings, status, relationships, etc. This can make us understand how we are conditioned by various external factors. When we realize this and when we can free ourselves from such conditionality, we could develop a kind of unconditionality, which would be a strong basis for bringing about change in ourselves and other people.

Now, let us turn to the problem of violence, or any other major problem for that matter. Actually, various forms of child neglect and abuse are by all means a form of violence. These are most definitely major factors in developing physical and mental health problems, including depression, anxiety, and addiction. Now, from the discussion so far, we should be aware that

superficial "correction" would *not* really solve the problem. We need a principled approach. And the best approach, in my opinion, would be for us to be mindful of the situation and based on that deep understanding, to act responsibly. It would be impossible to tell exactly what would be the best action. It would all depend on our capacity to truly understand the source of a problem. For example, a deep-rooted and on-going conflict between ethnic groups would require the change of a lot of people involved in the conflict and may not take place overnight. Nevertheless, as the history demonstrates, there still is a possibility that even such a problem could be resolved through the intrinsic motivation of just a few people initially, and then that of more and more people eventually. Naturally, it will take an exceptional amount of effort. However, it would certainly be possible also to prevent future violence. If we are mindful of our attachments/limitations and act responsibly, it would be much more unlikely for each of us to act violently.

So, despite the problems with commonly-used approaches to bring about change in people, I do believe that it is possible to achieve this, albeit in a not so conventional and/or swift manner. In short, when we really want to bring about changes in people, the "people" we need to change *first* are ourselves, not others.

> "If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As a man changes his own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards him....We need not wait to see what others do." (Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi)

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Note: The URL was valid as of August 5, 2013.

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