



Personal growth

Personal growth requires a change in self-image, say **Barry Johnson and Mandy Geal**

The development of a mature person will result in a change in that person's self-image. Oh dear, that is a bold and argumentative statement.

Let's just see if the statement has some merit. Each of us has a self-image. We see ourselves in some way – smart, slow, friendly, distant, well-intentioned, happy, sad, lazy, hardworking, misunderstood and loads of other descriptors. We can all

pick adjectives that describe us. We might even have taken some personality-profiling questionnaire that gave us other self-descriptors.

So this is the 'I' that we see in the mirror in the morning when shaving or putting on the make-up: the 'I' that thinks, dreams, talks, feels, believes, acts and is. The 'I' that nobody really knows fully, not even the 'I' seeing himself in the mirror.

In this article we will explore that self-image in relation to

becoming more effective at whatever we want to become more effective at. That may come about by attaining behaviours that will help us do what we want to do.

Why have we raised the issue of self-image? Self-image has a great deal to do with our development towards realising our own potential. Our experience tells us that nobody can tell you exactly how you should develop. Rather, some skilled people may help you understand yourself in the situation

you are in, give you some tools and behaviour models and trust you to find the best direction for yourself. The important fact behind your development is that you want to take the risk of developing.

Consider this. We often behave very differently in different situations. Imagine you are a Chelsea supporter with a group of friends at an important match. There you are on the terraces, cheering on your millionaire heroes, feeling the excitement, the adrenaline charge and the joy of being with friends. Next day is Sunday and you promised to take Aunt Edna, who is 83, to the cathedral for an important service where a choir from Hamburg has come to perform.

Imagination is a wonderful thing. The question is, do you behave the same in these two situations or do you behave differently? The point is our behaviour is often situational, it is our choice, but we are still the same person in both situations.

Mind you, we can only behave differently if, firstly, we recognise that different behaviours are necessary and, secondly, we actually have a repertoire of appropriate behaviours for the different situations we face. Imagine you are at a meeting as the 'expert'; your behaviours will be different from being there as the chairperson.

We change our role in different situations: we are son or daughter, friend, mother or father, advisor or advisee, so every hour or maybe every few minutes we are adopting different roles and we do it smoothly, often without thinking, sometimes deliberately, sometimes clumsily and ineffectively because we lack the behaviours required of a particular situation.

The more we develop a range of behaviours and the more we understand ourselves and others, the more we can choose the appropriate behaviours for the situations we face. With the progression towards our self-actualisation comes choice.

The root of change

Self-image is important because everything we see, hear, feel or otherwise sense is influenced by how we perceive ourselves. When you are listening to a presentation by an executive or a politician, you are likely to 'hear' something different from the person next to you and the difference can sometimes be very marked.

Although self-image is important in understanding human behaviour generally, it becomes critically so in understanding our own personal development. As a matter of cold, hard, psychological fact, a change in behaviour results in a change in self-image. The converse is also true. People stuck in a self-image that they are afraid to change will resist learning new behaviours and are therefore unlikely to fulfil their potential. Let us just give some reassurance: changing self-image is growth; there is no loss. Understanding and flexibility are two of the payoffs.

Human beings constantly change their behaviour, as we can see if we examine others and ourselves critically. It is a

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superficial observation to say that Fred is the same person he was five years ago. Also, to assume that 'he hasn't changed' says more about our own closed mind than anything about Fred. Technically, Fred isn't exactly the same today as he was yesterday: he is a day older and has learned something new, however negligible. As a result, his perception of today's events is different, no matter how imperceptibly, from what it was yesterday.

He may have had nothing of significance happen to him but

he will be different. Change in behaviour is continual.

One problem we have in thinking about changes in behaviour comes from our difficulty in detecting those changes. We believe that there are several reasons for this difficulty. Firstly, it is made worse by fallacious generalisations such as 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks' or 'he was born that way'. This is self-evidently untrue: we change considerably as we get older, not only in physical appearance but also in what we know, what we understand and what we have learned.

Often, with maturity comes the realisation that there is still a lot more to learn and that what we know already will change.

Secondly, we often 'see' what we expect to see. For example, people frequently say things such as "I am no good at giving presentations". This belief can prevail even in the face of evidence to the contrary, ie a satisfied audience! People assume that, because they feel nervous or worried they might not know all the answers to questions, this will inevitably make their presentation 'no good'. So instead of reflecting objectively on the outcome of the presentation, they focus on their negative feelings and continue in their belief.

Deep change

So, if you want development in the deeper sense, something more subtle and basic is required in your development effort. Such deeper growth is a change in self-image. What do we mean by that? A person once unreliable in her judgement or who lacked drive *grows* towards reliability in her judgement or towards stronger drive. Growth in this sense brings observable changes in behaviour because the person is now inwardly different. In what way is she different? She is different, for example, in self-perception, in attitude towards the job, towards other people or towards the company.

All development is self-development. That does not mean you do it alone. It means you focus 100 per cent on acquiring the basic behaviours and then keep practising and practising them. It is not an academic exercise, learning something from a book or listening when being told. It requires total focus and hard work. It requires the motivation to deal with potentially negative feelings associated with being outside your comfort zone as you continue through the learning cycle from conscious incompetence to unconscious competence.

Our experience shows that such growth can be as difficult to achieve as it is desirable. People change because they want to and because they have to in response to new insights and understanding. They may gain the basics in a designed learning environment but the real learning occurs in application in the real environment. Because the basics are established, they gain further insights in their everyday operations.

People do not change because they are told to or because somebody else wants them to. They change because they want to, or the exigencies of the situation give them no choice.

Such growth, as we have said, implies changes within the person. Growing people examine themselves, they are self-critical and identify what they have done that has led to success and then they try it again. People learn **what to do** from success; they learn **what not to do** from failure. They actively consider the behaviours they will use in a situation and then they analyse what the response and outcome was.

Growing people emerge with new depths of motivation, a sharper sense of direction and a more vital awareness of how they want to perform at work and in life in general. Such growth in self-image is at the heart of a real personal development effort; it is

not always simple and not always clear. Handling this complexity and lack of clarity is a sign of maturity.

Conflicts

We mentioned earlier that you

will experience several roles. You also have several selves but you are always you, a developing you, a changing you, a flexible you. If there are conflicts among these roles or if you cannot deal with any of the roles required of you, discomfort arises. Such discomfort may bring with it such dynamics as stress, depression and guilt. Equally, it can bring with it positive dynamics such as the motivation to learn and the drive to achieve. Successful people have this positive dynamic: they learn and grow and fulfil their potential.

Conflicts between self-images can be a cause of ineffective behaviour. Another cause is the disparity between 'how I see myself' and 'how others see me'. Is it them or is it me? You may have met people who believe things about themselves that are manifestly untrue. They may grossly overrate their capabilities or they may grossly underrate themselves. To some extent we all do that. One solution is to be mature enough to have some objective self measures and a second is to very carefully listen to what you're being told – directly and indirectly.

There is a falsehood abroad: 'it's not what you know but who you know'. It's nearer the truth to say 'it's not what you know but who you are'. Do you know who you are and if you do, what are you doing to build on your strengths and take action on your needs?

Of course, if things are going well, there is a tendency to sit back and indulge in the basic comfort of the *status quo*. There is a 'natural' tendency not to work at change. The mature person has an established pattern of attitudes that has served him well. He has acquired a range of behaviour patterns and habits and knows what he wants and doesn't want, and so has blinkers. Then it comes as a shock when he is passed over for a promotion or a partner decides that she needs somebody different.



When mature people develop, it is against this natural reluctance to move from the *status quo*. There are changes in perception and mental processing, the ability to handle complexity and have vision, the ability to understand themselves and their relationship with others. These changes are not just changes in knowledge, experience or skills but, for fundamental changes, the more peripheral changes must first be tackled and achieved.

Steps to self-realisation

Growth that we have discussed does not proceed in nice, clean, logical steps. It may be triggered by an incident or by an exposure at a learning event. You may be reading something or watching TV and an inexplicable trigger occurs. What we can say is your growth is progressive and you are the driving force behind it.

Self-examination Where might we begin? Let's try self-examination. The first inkling may be that you do not know what you want or wish that your behaviour was different. Your forced introspection lays the groundwork for insight without which growth, if it occurs, is haphazard. Insight is the 'oh, I see now' feeling. Insights are the real genuine glimpses of ourselves as we really are. They are the building blocks of growth.

Self-expectation After self-examination, you now see the direction in which you want to grow. You are putting new demands on yourself. Psychologists have an approach that says first accept you have a problem, it's your problem not anybody else's problem, now set out to find a solution.

What you may find is that, once you set out down this route, the problem clarifies or changes – it may grow before it shrinks. You are the driver to solve it.

Self-direction You are the master

Growing people emerge with new depths of motivation, a sharper sense of direction and a more vital awareness of how they want to perform at work and in life in general

of your own destination. Nothing can be done to you to make you grow. Real development occurs only as you want it to and it is your insights that enable that development. In-depth learning requires motivation.

The growing person derives strength, desire and drive from inner, unachieved goals and derives satisfaction from self-realisation.

Broadening perceptions The dynamics of personal growth are clear: you must see yourself in relation to your environment, at both the personal and interpersonal levels, and develop your self-image partly in response to what you observe around you. If you only see a very immediate world, your concept of yourself will be narrow; if you see yourself on a larger plane, with broad horizons moving into the future, your self-image will expand.

Often the difference can be heard in the way people describe themselves or the work they do: "I give piano lessons" or "I teach music". Both may 'do' the same thing – both descriptions are bounded – but one self-image is 'bigger' than the other.

The next growth thing for them may be in the concept of teaching: the move from the didactic to an integrated approach, seeing the learner as a participant rather than as an attendee. With such development comes change in behaviour and

understanding that reaches wider than the situation that spawned it.

Towards self-realisation It is not enough just to see ourselves as we are now. It is necessary and is a starting point, a basis upon which to build. We must see what we *could* be, assess the options and opportunities, and grow into that. Even then we are not finished. We can start again with self-examination.

Dynamic growing people fulfil themselves as they live. They have lives that are an unfolding of their potential. As a dynamic developing person, your self-image is constantly evolving – you change things as you continually realise yourself. This is genuine growth.

Can all people aspire to this personal growth that leads to self-realisation? Perhaps not, but growing people have unrealised potential if their self-image, their self-expectation, their self-direction and their constantly broadening perceptions allow them to find it.

The difference between a person who develops and one who does not is not to do with intelligence, or innate abilities, or education – it is to do with self-image. Self-aware people create opportunities. The question for you may be: how much do I value my life? What do I want to do with it? What must I do to be myself?

If you are asking these sorts of questions, you have started to develop. If you have found answers, you have direction to that development and, if you are taking action, real action, you are developing. ■

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