

Resource 11: Emotionally intelligent change

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Change with people in mind

Antidote consultant Wil Pennycook-Greaves draws on her work in schools and hospitals to cast some light on how change can be managed in an emotionally literate way. She uses her experience to illuminate the principles that underpin Antidote's work in schools and other organisations.

'We live in a rapidly changing world where little is certain. We are compelled repeatedly to enter the unknown and leave old certainties behind. While such change can be exciting, it also generates anxiety. A lot of the challenges our society faces involve dealing with unhelpful ways of responding to the uncertainty that results.

One response is our current enthusiasm for measuring and quantifying change by setting targets and evaluating performance. What often gets missed out of measurement criteria is an understanding of how people deal with change.

Too much management literature bases its understanding about change in systems that come from engineering, specifically from cybernetic ideas about how outputs result from inputs. The consequence of applying such thinking is that many people end up feeling that they are being treated as machines. By failing to value people as human beings, the possibility of effective change is blocked. Motivating and developing people requires us to think about how people learn and change most effectively. If we do not do this, then all the initiatives that we start will only ever partially succeed.

Connecting to feelings

In a cybernetic system, like the one that operates your central heating, there is always the implication that someone is outside the system, manipulating it, turning the temperature up or down. In human processes, by contrast, nobody is truly outside. Whether you are a leader, a consultant, a worker, or a government official, everyone is connected to everyone else, and everyone has some share of the responsibility for what happens.

To think about change in an emotionally literate way requires us to move away from the machine analogies that have dominated our thinking for so long. People communicate through gestures, words and actions, some known about and some not known. It is who we are: complex beings, existing in a web of communication, constantly co-creating the future in the present.

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To understand how change can be achieved requires us to get inside these connections between people and the feelings they evoke. Our anxieties about change are accentuated if our experience is denied and we do not feel that we have any right to our feelings about it. Unacknowledged feelings do not disappear, they surface somewhere else, and often more destructively.

Spaces for listening

If, then, we want to manage change in an emotionally literate way, we need to give space to how people are experiencing change, so that we can ensure their everyday interactions with each other, engage the emotional aspects of experience.

One way of doing this is to set up development groups, where people can engage with the issues that concern them, including their resistance to change. This will happen when people experience the sense of safety that comes from feeling listened to, engaged with, treated fairly and considerately. The consequence will be that they feel able to listen, to engage and to treat others with the same degree of respect.

I was involved in setting up a group for educational professionals who met together with an intention of talking about their work with young people. In the event, the participants decided that before they started to talk about the day to day aspects of their work, they wanted to discuss their relationships with other people outside their group. It seemed that there were unresolved issues getting in the way of people both working effectively and feeling good about their work. Although the discussion did not focus on advice giving or problem solving, actions emerged, conversations took place and issues were resolved.

In a mental health unit where I work, around 15-25 professionals from inside and outside the unit, meet informally each week to learn about particular aspects of mental illness. We have lunch together and present our ideas. Each week someone talks about some aspect of their work. With participants sitting in a circle, difficult issues are explored and discussed; people agree and disagree. They are also able to talk about how they are affected emotionally by the work.

Principles

These groups aim to provide a space where hidden issues can rise to the surface and be discussed, where the difficult feelings that get in the way of clear thinking can be addressed. Thinking and feeling are always linked, but

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the processes within organisations mean that they are not often experienced or expressed together.

Through working in this way, professionals deepen their relationships with each other and become able to think more holistically about their work. By moving the blocks to relating, people find it easier to move out of dysfunctional patterns. It becomes more difficult for the individuals in these groups to split things and people off. It becomes harder to say, 'it was him that did it', or it was the system. People come to realise that they too are involved. They cannot blame and scapegoat other people. The result, if we are very fortunate, is not only to have an emotionally literate society but an ethical one as well!

This kind of change can happen in other ways too. It does not necessarily require the setting up of formal groups or workshops. Schoolchildren can come together in circle time and achieve broadly the same ends. Adults talking together, informally as well as in more formal or sustained conversations, can also change 'what goes on around here'. One of the aims of the professional development groups is to enable people not only to listen but to be more open and more challenging with each other. It is this, in our ordinary conversations too, that really enables change to happen. Perhaps one of the main messages from emotional literacy is that it does not necessarily require more resources (although they may be necessary from another point of view), nor a guru to tell us what to do. What it does require is being prepared to engage with each other in ways that allow for differences yet value openness.'