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Virtues for Leading Change

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Pressures to change abound and often create individual frustration and stress due to individuals feeling victimized during times of change unless they have a sense of control over the change. Additionally, change can often seem daunting, beyond the capacity of any one person, although systems theory purports its possibility. Granted, the holonic notion of life suggests people, also known as individual systems, never have complete control due to their participation in larger systems which creates constant flux. This does not suggest, however, that individuals do not have some control. This article illustrates the importance of self-control in times of significant change and argues that individuals can and do change the world.

Change is inevitable. Recognizing the need for it is not difficult. A rather simple biological metaphor can explain the macro and micro phenomena of change. All systems, those globally large and individually small, are living entities. These systems change and are changed by self-imposing, as well as environmental, conditions. The most basic understanding of this need for change is survival. In the pursuit of survival, an environmental condition is created—a culture—in which and from which systems react. In some systems the sole aim is survival. For other systems, those with a sense of secured survivability, the aim is often to attain advantage over competing (whether perceived or real) systems to achieve greater levels of “comfort” in survival. The constancy and inevitability of change is obvious when considering that as one system changes that change impacts another, which in turn affects another, and so forth. All the while, it is reciprocating back onto itself because the change being made by one system becomes part of the larger, collective systems’ environment. As originally coined by Koestler (1967) and subsequently supported by others (Simon, 1990; Wilber, 1995), the world is indeed *holonic*, which means all systems are connected to one another. Systems

interdependently coexist. I am connected to you and we are both connected to other individual systems, as well as to systems such as groups, teams, units, divisions, and communities. These are connected to organizations, which are connected to other organizations. This connection is not simply geographic, but rather in literal totality. The action of one system affects environmental conditions of all the systems, which creates change among all other systems. One, regardless how small, is connected to all, regardless how large. Due to this dynamic for survival and more, it is recognized that change is inevitable.

Understanding the constancy of change is to understand *general system theory* (von Bertalanffy, 1968). In short, this theory can serve to direct our daily actions and perhaps it should. When applying general system theory to anything dynamic, change is recognized as a requisite for survival regardless of size and circumstance. For instance, let us evaluate some systems in need of change starting with the larger, global systems, followed by the smaller, individual systems. The world financial system is in need of change from its current standing of crisis. The social system is in need of change to address issues of severe inequalities. The powers of each nation's political system are in need of change as the notion of "one-world" continues to emerge in awareness and reality. The organizations that operate within the larger aforementioned systems are not immune to change. They are interdependently dynamic systems and are therefore susceptible to environmental conditions that pressure change. Within organizational systems there are even smaller systems such as business units and divisions of work that are in constant change. Within these systems there are even smaller, individual human systems at work. It is within these individual systems that observations of personal interventions (e.g., human actions) for change can be observed and over time extrapolated to recognize larger system change. To understand the impact that an individual system has on other individual and larger systems, consider Adam Smith's theory of the invisible hand. The famed Scottish economist used the illustration once as a metaphor in his *Wealth of Nations* text (1776/1994, p. 485). He argued that individuals maximizing their revenues/incomes in turn maximize the total revenue of a society as a whole, and thus one system has a direct impact on another system, and eventually over time all systems. Later, economist Milton Friedman (1982) suggested Smith's invisible hand metaphor highlights the possibility of cooperation among interdependent systems without coercion. However, there is certainly coercion at the individual system level. Additionally, there is corruption, conspiracy, and character concerns among human systems, especially among those that aim solely for individual maximization that, due to the holonic nature of the world, ripple such ideals throughout all other systems.

With an aim toward maximization, there are negative effects for the cultural environment and thus for systems seeking survival. Economists refer to these negative effects as *externalities*. An externality is a byproduct from achieving a goal, output, or otherwise outcome such as a product or service offering. For instance, maximizing output from a manufacturing facility operated by individuals may produce not only the valued product, but also unvalued byproducts such as waste runoff into streams or pollution exhaust that spills into the atmosphere. The deterioration of water and air are externalities from production and are illustrations of how negative solutions propagate from the action of individual systems to organizational systems to global systems and serve to create the

need for more change. Clearly the impact from externalities can be considerable. Polluted air can cause health problems and ultimately death to some systems. Polluted water can cause similar problems and create the need for new products such as bottled water to help ensure survival.

Similar externalities can be observed at individual system levels, especially those systems that seek maximization solely for one's self. To recognize that individual systems are part of a larger whole and that the actions and behaviors from one system affects all systems requires cognition. The behavioral aspects necessary for action to form from cognition take a level of self-control. If self-control is low or non-existent, selfishness and greed grow apparent. When this is the case, externalities including the eventual abuse of drugs and alcohol, excessive gambling, smoking, and a variety of criminal acts stemming from dishonesty are present (Higgins & Marcum, 2005). The notion of self-maximization and its externalities to life warrants further discussion about the value of human character especially since the power of one's individual system can affect all systems. This article aims to address the means for effective change in the world and specifically discusses how individual systems should participate in much larger systems. How can we best understand life and make productive choices as we participate in life?

A Further Investigation into Character and Change

The Christian principle, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you," implies that there is power an individual system has on both other individual and larger systems. Christians are not alone in this belief. The Buddhist perspective is: "Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful." The Hinduism perspective is: "Do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you." The Confucianism perspective is: "Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you." The Islam perspective is: "None of you [truly] believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself." The Judaism perspective is: "What you hate, do not do to any one." The Taoism perspective is: "Regard your neighbor's gain as your gain, and your neighbor's loss as your own loss." Although there are variances in form (i.e., "do unto others" versus "do not do"), there is an implicit regard to human respect across these varying faiths and thus offer an additional commonality perhaps to the world need for change. Beyond change, there does seem the possible commonality of a one-world golden rule or reciprocating standard of human ethic.

It has been stated here that the world requires change. Further, it is argued here that the most effective change is best achieved through interventions from virtuous individual systems acting and behaving with high-ethical standards and moral character. The concept of virtues is quite simple according to C. E. Johnson (2009) who claimed, "Good people (those with high moral character) make good moral choices" (p. 70). These moral- and character-driven people usually understand the holonic nature of life, or at least believe in moral codes, and as such make choices not solely for self-indulgent maximization, but rather for the larger common good, which includes self and others. Rather than maximization, perhaps this perspective could be more appropriately viewed as optimization for one and all. There is recognition in this optimization perspective that choices affect the world—from one individual system to another and to organizational

systems and beyond. This is the premise, that the power of one, regardless how small, can affect all, regardless how big. The only question is: How should we, as individual systems, act in doing so?

Some question the utility of a human system ethic especially relative to organizational systems that aggressively compete for maximization of markets and profits. This questioning is often raised in secular settings because high-moral character is sometimes in stark contrast to the self-centeredness and resulting externalities from individual system greed, arrogance, dishonesty, and ruthlessness. To be sure, it is not just the individual systems that suffer from these tragedies, but rather all systems. It is important to understand that the negative externalities observed from individual system maximization can be avoided. C. E. Johnson (2009) researched a number of organizations that employed virtuous people who created an organizational system culture of high-moral character and were able to successfully sustain markets and profits in highly competitive arenas. Thus, individual moral standards *can* sustain individual systems, as well as organizational systems, thus mitigating the unvalued negative externalities.

Individual system self-centeredness can stop without deteriorating free market innovation and entrepreneurship. This sentiment is usually challenged by for-profit executives that explain “it’s just business.” It is questionable that the amount of white-collar criminal behavior can be justified as “just business.” Further, it is not really just business, but more accurately, “it’s just economics” in which one individual system is in search of maximization and allows the invisible hand to take care of all other systems. It is important to recognize, however, that even the “father of economics” valued human care and caring among one another. Before his authoring of the *Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith (1759/2000) noted, “The character of every individual, so far as it can affect the happiness of other people, must do so” (p. 3). Smith was not suggesting the creation of happiness for some and misery that stems from externalities for others. Moreover, his moral sentiment undergirds the need for human virtue that affects all. Smith believed in maximization, but in conscious recognition of the impact the individual system has on others. Thus, it is proposed that moral standards, or virtues, are in need of exploration relative to changing the systems of modern day concern.

The Pressures to Change and the Role of the Virtuous Leader

C. E. Johnson (2009) suggested that individual systems aiming to address organizational system change and wanting to do so from a humanist perspective must embody the virtues of courage, integrity, humility, reverence, optimism, and justice. This list can be easily amended to include the additional three cardinal virtues (temperance, prudence, and fortitude) and theological virtues (faith, hope, and charity). There is also love, joy, peace, patience, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23) that can be argued as important for inclusion on the list, but even then the list of virtues is far from exhaustive. While each is important, it is the last one noted, self-control, that warrants further discussion here as the investigation into individual systems and their impact relative to organizational systems and change unfurls to address global concerns.

The reason for focusing on self-control is due to the means of understanding individual system influence relative to organizational system change. Understanding organizational systems as any group of people acting collectively and affecting other systems, it is of vital importance to understand the intervening powers of the systems influencing organizational change, which are the individual human systems. This causal notion is supported by Cameron and Green (2004) who noted that at the heart of organizational change is the individual who is willing to change and be changed. Importantly, Williams (1997) noted that individuals are likely to feel victimized by external factors, that is environmental conditions created by other systems, unless they feel a sense of control over their life and destiny. Therefore, it is logical to investigate self-control relative to the individual human system's ability to change other individual and larger systems.

The best way to achieve positive individual change, and hence organizational change, is through involvement. As noted (Williams, 1997), involvement mitigates the externality of victimization by creating a sense of control over change. The individuals responsible within organizational systems to help instill this sense of control are recognized as leaders. It is well known that leaders are responsible for creating interventions appropriate for change (Winston & Patterson, 2006). It is the leader that seeks change (Sadler, 1997), copes with change (Kotter, 1990), influences change (Harris, 1989), helps organizations to adapt to change (Jacobson, 2000), builds positive and productive change (Meyer, Houze, & Slechta, 1998), enables continuous change (Bradshaw, 1998), manages change (Bergman, Hurson, & Russ-Eft, 1999; Ulrich, Zenger, & Smallwood, 1999), serves as a catalyst for change (Yeung & Ready, 1995), and simply makes change happen (Schein, 1992). Realizing intended change is the most paramount concern for leaders (Burns, 1978). The notion of leader here is not bound by positional power, but rather individual power and thus the importance of self-control because this virtue is a central tenant in navigating periods of change (Bandura, 1986; Williams, 1997). Certainly the leader affects change. However, the question remains: Does he or she affect change from a virtuous position or a self-centered one? No doubt, either way affects change, but there will be far more externalities in the world from the latter as compared to the former.

Understanding Self-Control

Self-control has been defined as “engaging in behaviors that result in delayed (but more) reward” (Logue, 1995, p. 3). This definition shares meaning with a plethora of other terms including self-regulation and self-discipline (Bandura, 1986; Baumeister, Heatherton, & Tice, 1994; Carver & Scheier, 1998; Karoly, 1993; Rosenbaum, 1983), willpower (Descartes, 1649/1996; Elster, 1979; Muraven & Baumeister, 2000), personal rules (Ainslie, 1982), self-management (Wood & Bandura, 1989; Yukl, 2002), self-enhancement (Schrauger, 1975), and self-command (Smith, 1776/1994). Strayhorn (2002) recognized the multitude of terms synonymous with self-control and concluded they all “involve doing something less immediately pleasurable than an alternative, because it has a greater total expected benefit or is more ethical” (p. 7). Thus, self-control

serves to mediate temptations of short-term and myopic, individual system gains for the potential of greater gains recognized by a larger whole.

The mediation of temptation can be viewed simply as psychological. However, psychological theories differ regarding the manner and measure of control. Whereas psychodynamic theories posit one's actions are no more than a response to stimuli, behaviorist theories posit individuals have degrees of control in their environment (Slife & Williams, 1995). Bandura (1986) claimed human functioning is a matter of mutual control among internal (self) and external (environmental) factors. His social cognitive theory highlights this sense of control suggesting individuals both influence and are influenced by their environment through "triadic reciprocal causation" (Bandura, p. 23). This suggests behavioral, cognitive, and environmental factors operate co-determinately as illustrated in Figure 1.

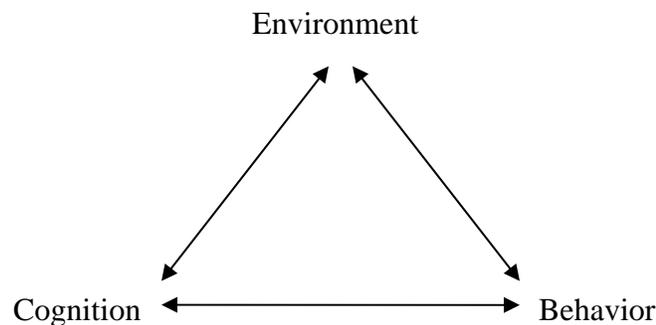


Figure 1. Bandura's (1997) triadic reciprocal causation model.¹

Bandura (1986) summarized this triadic reciprocal causation model as: "What people think, believe, and feel affects how they behave" (p. 25). Further, Bandura suggested individual behavior and action dictates the condition of the environment. This behavior is bound by self-control. Social cognitive theory allows for such control due to positing that personal agency, which is intentional actions and social structure that can be interpreted as environmental conditions, operate interdependently. Extrapolating this understanding and the illustration via multiple systems, one can begin to envision the holonic and complex nature of life. As individual systems, humans are interdependently connected to other individual systems and larger organizational and global systems. In such a universal environment, the behavior of one system affects all including the one.

¹ Adapted from *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control* (p. 6), by A. Bandura, 1997, New York, NY: W. H. Freeman. Copyright 1997 by W. H. Freeman.

Thus, to be witness of change at the largest level, change must originate at an individual system level.

Perhaps Mahatma Gandhi (1983) captured it best when he suggested that we need to be the change we want to see in the world. Gandhi's sentiment is in similar context to Cameron and Green's (2004) notion that to achieve organizational change there must be individual change. From the ability of cognition, individual systems can observe and learn the change needed in the world. However, it is only through individual system action and behavior that change occurs. To be sure, inaction is too a behavior that affects individual and larger systems. All action and inaction creates the environment that individual systems, organizational systems, and global systems operate. David Whyte (2002) captured this notion when he wrote, "Every action taken, from the moment we switch off the alarm clock in the morning . . . has the potential to change the world, leave it cold with indifference, or . . . nudge it infinitesimally in the direction of good and evil" (p. 265). The notion of change, character, and control are human-system responsibilities from which greater levels of change occur.

Conclusion

When considering change, the magnitude often seems daunting and beyond the capacity of any one person, although systems theory purports its possibility. Granted, the holonic notion of life suggests that people, also known as individual systems, never have complete control due to the fact each person is participating in something larger than their individual self (A. G. Johnson, 1997). Therefore individual systems and environmental conditions are in constant flux. This does not suggest, however, that individual systems do not have some control. The opposite is in fact true. While individual systems may not possess control over all other systems, they do possess self-control and through the understanding of triadic reciprocal causation (Bandura, 1986) the behaviors from an individual system can indeed affect and change all systems. Any individual system can and does change the world.

This article evaluated the virtue of self-control as a requisite human capacity to manage one's self and others through life, especially in times of change. Anything less aims toward self-maximization and at the cost of creating unvalued externalities into the environment of all systems. How do you influence the world? What is your leadership style? Do you aim for self-maximization or optimization with a clear understanding of the holonic nature of life? There is much in need of change in the world. Be the change to see results you want in the world.

About the Author

Tim Rahschulte has 18 years of professional management experience in for-profit and non-profit organizations. He has spent the last 6 years in state government where he serves as a business transition architect responsible for enterprise-wide change initiatives. Tim is also an assistant professor at George Fox University's School of Management

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