HBR Blog Network

If You Want to Change, Don't Read This

by Tomas Chamorro-Premuzic | 8:00 AM December 26, 2013

There is a great scene in *Godfather 2* where Kay (Diane Keaton) complains to husband Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) about his unfulfilled promise to make his business fully legit and quit being a mafioso. Michael responds that he is still working on it, reassuring Kay emphatically: "I'll change, I'll change — I've learned that I have the strength to change."

Although most of us aren't part of the mafia, we are still a bit like Michael Corleone in that we overestimate our capacity for change. In theory everyone can change, but in practice most people don't… except for some well-documented changes that affect most of us.

For example, most people display antisocial tendencies during adolescence (http://criminology.fsu.edu/crimtheory/moffitt93.htm) and slower thinking in late adulthood (http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev.psych.50.1.471) , but these changes are by no means indicative of a psychological metamorphosis. Rather, they are akin to common lifespan changes in physical traits, such as gains or drops in height during childhood and late adulthood, respectively — they occur to everyone. Likewise, there are typical changes in personality, even within 5-year periods. A seminal review (http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=search.displayRecord&uid=2006-00818-001) showed that we become more prudent, emotionally stable, and assertive with age, while our energy and intellectual curiosity dwindle after adolescence. In other words, as we grow older we become more calm and mature, but also more passive and narrow-minded.

A more interesting question is whether categorical changes are feasible. Can someone be extremely introverted at certain age, but super outgoing at another? Can someone transition from being a self-centred narcissist to being a caring and giving soul? Or from being exceptionally smart to being incredibly stupid?

On the one hand, there is no shortage of famous case studies to illustrate radical transformations in people's reputation (their public persona). Sometimes these changes — like Miley Cyrus's transformation from innocent Disney star to tongue-wielding twerker — seem more like carefully planned PR campaigns than true psychological journeys. But others do make us wonder if there's something deeper going on inside. Bill Gates started as a stereotypical computer nerd, then turned into a talented entrepreneur, then morphed into a ruthless empire-builder, and then became the most charitable person on earth, giving away most of his — and his friends' — wealth. The late Nelson Mandela, perhaps the least disputed moral figure of our times, had an arrogant, aggressive, and antisocial youth before inspiring everyone with his path of nonviolent resistance.

And yet scientific studies indicate that categorical changes in character are unusual. When there is change, it usually represents an amplification of our character. In other words, even when our patterns of change are unique, they are predictable: we simply become a more exaggerated version of ourselves. This happens in three different ways. First, we tend to interpret events according to our own personal biases, which only reinforces those biases. For instance, pessimists (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12219854) perceive ambivalent feedback as criticism, which, in turn, enhances their pessimism over time; the opposite happens with optimists. Second, we gravitate towards environments (http://defiant.ssc.uwo.ca/undergraduate/psych3440g/readings/Scarr198scar_mc.pdf) that are congruent with our own default attitudes and values. Hedonists seek pleasure and fun-loving people, which, in turn, makes them even more hedonistic. Aggressive people crave conflict and combat, which only augments their aggression. Altruists hang out with caring people and spend time helping others, which enhances their empathy and reinforces their selflessness. Third, our reputation does truly precede us: others (including strangers and acquaintances) make unconscious inferences about our character in order to explain our behavior and predict what we may do next. These intuitive evaluations may be inaccurate, but they are still self-fulfilling (http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/HomePage/Group/YeagerLAB/ADRG/Pdfs/Yeager%20Dweck%20HAB%20Child%20Development.pdf)

. With time, we morph into the person others think we are; their prejudiced and fantasized representation of us turns real and becomes ingrained in our identity. Reputation really is fate.

As a consequence, deliberate attempts to change are far less effective than we like to think, which is why most New Year's resolutions are never accomplished (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/12237978) — and why our long-term happiness levels are fairly constant and relatively immune (http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&id=2006-05893-003) to extreme life events (http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&uid=1980-01001-001) (whether it is a painful divorce or the joys of winning the lottery).

Needless to say, some people are more capable of changing than others. Ironically, those individuals tend to be more pessimistic about their very chances of changing. Indeed, neurotic, introverted and insecure people are more likely to change (http://psycnet.apa.org/index.cfm?fa=buy.optionToBuy&id=2001-18605-009) , whereas highly adjusted and resilient individuals are less changeable (http://www.psychologie.hu-berlin.de/prof/per/pdf/1991/temporalconsistency-1991.pdf) . Likewise, optimism (http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/15427560.2011.602197#.Uqyok2RdVw0) breeds overconfidence and hinders change by perpetuating false hopes (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19433147) and unrealistic expectations.

So, how can we change? The recipe for self-change is fairly straightforward — it is just hard to implement. In order to change, we need to start by building self-awareness, which is best achieved by obtaining (and believing) honest and critical feedback from others. Next, we must come up with a realistic strategy that focuses on attainable goals, such as changing a few specific behaviors (e.g., more eye contact, less shouting, more smiling, etc.) rather than substantial aspects of our personality (e.g., interpersonal sensitivity, empathy, and sociability). Finally, we will need an enormous amount of effort and dedication in order to both attain and maintain any desired changes — or we will quickly revert to our old habits. In short, change requires self-critical insight, humble goals, and indefatigable persistence. It means going against our nature and demands extraordinary levels of willpower.

So think carefully before you promise to change. And if you have tried to change and failed — well, you've got lots of company.