

Introduction

How do people change? Framed in that simple question are both the history and the mystery of our work as OD consultants, and most of us spend our professional lives searching for a definitive answer. Over the last few decades, as a profession, we've explored and identified a number of conditions, variables, and factors that seem to help people change, so you undoubtedly already have your own opinions about what works and what doesn't. However, we would like to make a provocative proposal and introduce you to another dynamic that we believe makes a critical difference as people struggle with the challenge of personal change.

Based on our experience, we're convinced that individual change doesn't occur without focused, external acknowledgement. Specifically, we believe that if a person wishes to initiate and sustain long-lasting change, another person is needed to *witness* that process. So, when change does occur, it's largely because a person moving through a transition has been *seen in a special way*.

That last distinction is critical. What we're inviting you to consider here is probably already familiar to you, at least unconsciously, because most of us are aware of the plague or pleasure of being noticed—the way another person's attention, depending on its intent, may cause us to flush with embarrassment or glow with pride. Being noticed has impact. And so the act of paying close attention to another person is an act that carries tremendous power.

The Power of the Witness

To serve as a powerful partner in a *change* process, however, a person in the role of witness must pay attention in a trustworthy, special way—and the person being

witnessed must believe that he or she is being seen with a particular blend of precision, care, and vigilance. For this reason, the act of witnessing, while extraordinarily simple, is also subtle and complex, since its power also depends on the doer's welcoming of the witness's observation. This delicate agreement creates a special, reciprocal *relationship* between a doer and an observer.

So what does a witness do that's so special? What gives the role its power? We believe that while observing a person in the process of a change or transition (whether learning a new skill, changing life circumstances, making a decision, or transforming a mindset), a trustworthy witness is:

- Choosing to pay attention. (*Intention*)
- Selecting key behaviors to observe and watching mindfully. (*Precision*)
- Taking accountability for personal assumptions and reactions. (*Vigilance*)
- Working to suspend judgment and evaluation. (*Care*)

Being seen by a person who watches like this is not a familiar experience for most of us. However, if you've ever yearned to be seen by someone who sees you clearly and completely, supports you without intruding, provides a sense of safety in the midst of risk, and remains interested, yet neutral, as you try to master something new, then you already have an image of a *witnessing presence*.

So, as a witnessing presence, you are choosing and noticing, but you are also doing so with a sense of curiosity and compassion, without judgment, and with a sense of personal authenticity, that is, by also being true to yourself in the moment. Now what does that mean? It means that a witness must also

Forum

Becoming a Trustworthy Witness:

Lessons for Leaders and Consultants from Authentic Movement

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simultaneously watch him- or herself in the act of witnessing.

Witnessing—choosing to notice—also requires maintaining the integrity of the act itself, since the gaze of the witness gains its potency to support change only if the connection between doer and observer is mutually sustained. As a final step, the witness must be willing to communicate, as part of this delicate agreement, not only observations of the doer, but also an acknowledgment that the observations are choices made by the witness.

Learning to Witness

We have learned to understand and value the presence of the witness during individual change efforts thanks to the work of three stellar pioneers: John and Joyce Weir, leaders and pioneers in the self-development field, and Mary Starks Whitehouse, the creator of a process called Authentic Movement, which is the practice field we use to refine the act of witnessing. As it has been practiced since the 1950's, an Authentic Movement session involves two people, a *mover* and a *witness*.

In silence, with eyes closed, the mover simply notices and follows whatever impulses he or she finds in the body to move or be still. This is an act of “doing” in its purest form, without the encumbrances of other external influences. At the same time, the witness, sitting on the periphery of the space, watches the mover, following the criteria we have

described above. Using these two distilled roles, this process, when practiced with precision, care, and vigilance, can become a container that stimulates both self-understanding and a sharpened sense of those opportunities for noticing, choosing, and being true to yourself for both the mover (or doer) and the witness.

Over the years, we’ve discovered strong parallels in this process to our work as consultants, and we’ve begun to apply our own learning in workshops and coaching sessions. It turns out that when leaders and other consultants test our assumptions about witnessing, they tend to become as curious and convinced about its potential as we are. We think this is something to pay attention to!

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