HOW TO MEASURE THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF CHANGE

William Doverspike, Ph.D.
Drdoverspike.com
770-913-0506

When I think of life,
I think of three dimensions:
length, breadth, and depth. [1]

Rabbi Harold Kushner (1935–2023) provides a useful perspective on life: "I will insist to my last day that life should be measured in three dimensions, not only length but breadth—how many other people does it reach out to embrace?—and depth—what values do I stand for, even in my somewhat diminished condition?" (2015, p. 150).

Ten years later, another rabbi shared with me his three dimensions of change. I had met him several years earlier, and he became one of my favorite theologians. His wonderful wit and wisdom reminded me of another rabbi—the itinerant sage of Nazareth—who lived two millennia ago.

Locus of Control

One dimension of change relates to whether the locus of change appears internal or external. Internal motivation for change is usually perceived as voluntary ("I want to change"), whereas an external motivation for change is usually perceived as involuntary or forced ("I have to change"). Locus of Control (LOC) refers to our perception about the underlying causes of events in life. This dimension can be framed within this binary question: Do you believe your destiny is controlled by you and your internal resources or by external forces such as fate, god, or others?

Internal control orientation refers to the belief that the outcomes of our actions are contingent on what we do, whereas an external control orientation refers to the belief that the outcomes of our actions are contingent on events outside our personal control (Zimbardo, 1985).

Psychologist Julian Rotter (1966) published a scale to measure these two dimensions. People with internal LOCs believe they are in control and take responsibility for their own actions. Those with external LOC attribute—or blame—external forces for their circumstances.

Velocity of Change

Velocity refers to the speed or rate of change—fast or slow. Evolutionary change is slow and revolutionary change is fast.

In nature, some of the greatest and most spectacular changes were glacial in pace. The Grand Canyon, which is the largest canyon on earth, is the result of the Colorado River eroding rock for the past five to six million years. Yet the canyon is much younger than the rocks through which it winds. The oldest rocks in Grand Canyon are 1.8 billion years old. Geological time is much slower than biological time, such as that seen in genetic drift, natural selection, and speciation.

With behavioral change, most people overestimate what they think they can achieve in a short period of time, yet they underestimate what they can achieve over a long period of time.

Polarity of Change

Polarity refers to the whether the change is positive or negative. Positive changes include events such as births, graduations, and weddings. Negative changes include events such as injury, illness, and death.

In many cases, the polarity of a change may be very different in the long term than it seems at the time of the event that is associated with the change. For example, a change that involves a substantial loss may seem negative when it occurs, yet months or years later this change may seem positive. The English novelist Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) had originally planned to become a scientist. However, his poor eyesight forced him to turn to writing. Despite his poor eyesight, Huxley developed a futuristic vision which was the basis of his utopian novel *Brave New World*. Huxley once said, "Experience is not what happens to us, it is what we do with what happens to us."

Response to Change

Our response to change can range from fear and resistance to acceptance and adaptation. Our experiences can be either stumbling blocks or stepping-stones on the path of life. The difference is how we use them. It is not so much our circumstances but how we react to them that matters most. It is not so much what happens to us, but what happens within us that makes the most difference. It is not what happens to us, but what we do with what happens that matters the most in life. There is nothing so bad that something good cannot come out of it.

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