

What You Can and Cannot Change – Lessons for Today’s Business Coaches

***Professor Adrian Furnham Weighs Up Evidence at
2013 Meyler Campbell Annual Lecture***

London, November 26 2013. People can and do change over time and such change - when it happens - requires dedication and sometimes even a considerable amount of pain!

This was one of the key findings from the 2013 Meyler Campbell Annual Lecture delivered by world famous psychologist, Professor Adrian Furnham from University College London.

In his highly thought-provoking and stimulating lecture, Professor Furnham grappled with the fundamental questions – *‘What can you change and what can’t you change? What change strategies work best and why? And how long does that change last?’*

While he admitted that those who believe individuals can change, and those who believe that one’s personality remains fundamentally the same, both have compelling data to support their positions, Professor Furnham came up with a number of conclusions. Namely:

- That people can and do change over time – partly through maturing and partly voluntarily.
- That some things, such as trauma, therapy and education, are more likely to cause change.
- And that change takes time and can be a painful process.

During his lecture and the accompanying Questions & Answers session, Professor Furnham also looked at what we can learn from change as coaches and came up with a number of points for coaches to take away. These included:

- That providing scientific evidence that coaching works and is changing people remains challenging.
- That there is a variety of different questions relating to coaching that need to be addressed. For example, how long need the coaching last? Must they be volunteers? How can we pre-empt contamination in research from other factors? And what is the best outcome of success?

- The importance of not 'over-promising'. While coaching can facilitate change, it's not easy and may require considerable effort.
- An understanding of the dangers of being asked to change a person for someone else's benefit. Change can only take place voluntarily and from the inside out.
- How skills such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) can be a useful part of a coach's toolkit with research showing that CBT and in particular its attribution component can have some success in facilitating change.
- That you can partly coach for happiness; and
- That coaching, along with other mechanisms, can play an important role in turning technically-focused people into leaders.

What was clear from the outset of the lecture was that the stakes are high when addressing the issue of change.

"Millions of pounds rest on the answers to these very difficult questions," Professor Furnham claimed "From alternative medicine to dieting, coaching, therapy and training, huge industries are dependent on the assumption that certain activities can bring about desired, long-lasting and meaningful change."

He continues:

"Both supporters of change and those who believe our personality tends to stay the same have data to support their positions. And while it's often difficult to provide good data to support or disprove any position, it does not mean that we should not try!"

From Cynical Pessimist to Naïve Optimist

In providing an overview to the different approaches to addressing the question of change, Professor Furnham introduced three classifications: the *Cynical Pessimist* who believes what you see is what you get and that you are never going to change; the *Ditherer(!)* who believes that with the right support, such as through coaching, training and therapy, people can change; and the *Naïve Optimist* who is of the opinion that the right mind set and behaviour pattern can lead to significant change.

Central to the lecture were two schools of thoughts; The *Plasticity Hypothesis* where, personality, like plastic, is changeable, and *the Plaster Hypothesis*, where personality is fixed, like plaster.

The Plaster Hypothesis

In introducing participants to the Plaster Hypothesis, Professor Furnham invoked the work of Costa & McCrae (1994 & 1997).

In one of the first longitudinal studies of its type, Costa & McCrae found no meaningful changes in personality after the age of 30 years and that an individual's personality at the age of 30 is likely to be a good predictor of their personality at the age of 80.

Additional research, which backs up the plaster hypothesis and which Professor Furnham referred to, included the Stanford marshmallow experiment into delayed gratification, carried out by Walter Mischel in the 1960's and 1970's.

In these studies, a child was offered a choice between one small reward, such as a marshmallow provided immediately, or two small rewards if he or she waited. In follow-up studies, the researchers found that children who were able to delay gratification tended to have better life outcomes, establishing that there is often *"surprisingly little change over time"*, according to Professor Furnham.

Other research that Professor Furnham pointed to that backed up the idea of a plaster personality included the work of Professor Ian Dreary who found that people's intelligence, when measured 70 years after a previous intelligence test, remained remarkably stable.

Similarly, the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, which has studied children born between 1972 and 1973 in Dunedin, New Zealand and then reassessed them regularly throughout their lives, found that individual differences in temperament at a young age continued to have a long-term, pervasive influence on their adult personalities as well.

The Plasticity Hypothesis

While Professor Furnham stressed that much of the plaster hypothesis has been widely accepted, he admitted that more recently *"the pendulum has moved towards plasticity with the idea that people can change."*

One of the most famous examples of a radical personality change, Professor Furnham cited, was that of Phineas Gage, an American railroad construction foreman, who had an iron rod driven through his head in an accident, survived despite damage to his frontal cortex, and became a completely different personality.

Other more recent research involved analysing of the brains of London cabbies and determining whether changes could be detected in their brains (Maguire et al., 2000) in response to their environment and their focus on visual and perceptive intelligence.

Maguire et al's research found that the brain is not a static structure but instead changes its function and structure over time in response to environmental and other factors. In the case of Maguire et al, for example, taxi drivers, with their encyclopedic knowledge of London's notoriously complex street plan, were found to have enlarged posterior hippocampi, demonstrating the plasticity of the brain.

Other research has also found that personality traits change with age. The meta analysis of 92 longitudinal samples from adolescence to old age by Roberts et al (2006), for example, found that one's personality continues to develop beyond the age of 30 years. [Supporting this, Professor Felicia Huppert's 2005 Meyler Campbell Annual Lecture detailed the extensive studies showing hitherto unexpected positive capacity for physical and mental development in old age, including extreme old age. Ed.] As you get older, you are less likely to change, although you are likely to become more agreeable and conscientious, Roberts' research found!

It is research results, such as these, Professor Furnham stressed, that have strengthened the notion that all you need is effort and courage to change. However, he was quick to point out that change by its nature hurts – involving *"pain, deprivation and a re-interpretation of who you are. Whereas all diets fail because they are always short-term, real lifestyle change is never easy,"* he stressed.

What You Can And Cannot Change? – Seligman’s Hypothesis

Of course, for many, the answer as to whether you can change lies somewhere in between the plaster and plasticity hypotheses.

This links in with the work of Martin Seligman who identified areas, such as panic, moods and depression, as areas where change can occur, but not in areas such as sexuality, alcoholism or trying to relive childhood traumas as a means of undoing adult personality problems.

Central to Seligman’s work was positive psychology and the idea that optimism is a learned skill that can increase achievement and improve health. Key learnings that Seligman cited include the fact that:

- Activities that make people happy in small doses, such as shopping, good food and making money, do not lead to fulfillment in the long term.
- People who express gratitude on a regular basis have better physical health and well-being; and
- Optimism can protect people from mental and physical illnesses.

So can happiness and optimism be learned?

Here, Professor Furnham pointed to different mechanisms from social support and constructivist thinking through to Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and the fact that you can partly coach/train for increased happiness.

Can You Make People into Leaders?

One key question posed by Professor Furnham and central to the business coaching audience was whether people can be turned into leaders.

Can you take technical specialists, such as brain surgeons, airline pilots or accountants, and make them into efficient managers? *“In many cases, technical people get promoted so that they no longer do what they are good at,”* continued Professor Furnham.

In answering this question, Professor Furnham examined the three key methods used to turn people into leaders:

- i. Experiential activities, such as outplacements or job rotations;
- ii. an Educational approach through MBAs, case studies or leadership simulations; and
- iii. Personal, one-to-one activities such as coaching or mentoring.

All these methods play an important role.

Coaching, Therapy & Efficacy

So what about coaching and other interventions, such as therapy and training? Is there good evidence that particular interventions succeed in bringing about planned, long-term and desired change?

“Providing scientific evidence that coaching works is very problematic,” Professor Furnham admitted.

The environment in which it works, he continued, makes it very difficult to carry out clinical experiments, such as randomised, double-blind, placebo controlled studies that prove that coaching works. What, for example, is the best outcome of success? Is it happiness and yet how do we know that coaching is responsible for this?

Other questions (among many) relating to coaching that need to be addressed include:

- **Length of Coaching Time** - How long need it last?
- **Participants** - Need they be volunteers or do people who have been forced to come to coaching count?
- **Measurements of Success** - What is the best outcome measure of success? Can it be self-reported or observed behaviour? And
- **Contamination** - Are there other factors that should be taken into account? Coaching cannot operate in a vacuum. What about contextual factors, for example?

Professor Furnham also cited McKenna & Davis's (2009) research into the active ingredients for success in the admittedly very different area of which, psychotherapy. This found that the client's readiness to be coached was the most powerful ingredient (40%) followed by the coach-client relationship (30%).

Can coaching learn from therapy in its ability to measure success?

To this end, Professor Furnham explained that therapy tends to work well for a number of reasons from having a sense of being understood and assisted (the therapeutic alliance) through to greater self-examination, improved morale and a growing commitment to change.

Yet why again is therapy and coaching so difficult to prove?

Here, Professor Furnham pointed to the work of Lilienfeld et al, 2012 and their hypothesis that many practitioners resist trying to provide evidence based truth for a number of reasons. This includes not wanting to consider other factors/explanations which may account for outcomes through to putting the burden of proof on the sceptics rather than those who propose the untested therapies.

Other studies, however, have come up with more details on the efficacy of therapy.

Smith, Glass, & Miller (1980), for example, conducted a meta-analysis of 475 psychotherapy trials and reported that psychotherapy was effective in instigating personality trait changes and that personality traits can and do change quickly. Professor Furnham argued that we need to track personality with more dense assessments in order to appropriately understand such developments.

While admitting that coaching differs from therapy in a number of ways – from clients being better, having more power to act and focusing on increasing awareness and other more immediate practical outcomes rather than personality change – Professor Furnham argued that coaching still needs to be evaluated for its efficacy.

The lecture was followed by a Q&As session with a distinguished panel of Meyler Campbell Faculty Members including Isabel Witte, a German and Swiss qualified organisational psychologist and founding partner of Bernotat & Cie; Des O'Connell, himself a Meyler Campbell Business Coach Graduate and consultant with Sherwood PSF Consulting; and Dr Eyal Pavell, an adjunct Executive Coach for senior executive

programmes at IMD Business School in Lausanne. The vote of thanks to the Annual Lecture Speaker was given by Faculty Member, Liz Gooster.

Background Information

Adrian Furnham has been Professor of Psychology at University College London since 1992, having previously lectured at Oxford. His work has taken him around the world and he has lectured and held visiting professorships and scholarships at the Universities of New South Wales, the West Indies, Hong Kong and KwaZulu-Natal, as well as being Adjunct Professor of Management at the Norwegian School of Management. Professor Furnham has published 72 books as well as having a weekly column in *The Sunday Times* and produced scores of peer-reviewed papers. Like Noel Coward, he believes work is more fun than fun and considers himself to be a well-adjusted workaholic!

Meyler Campbell (www.meylercampbell.com) is the pre-eminent business coaching community which trains and develops senior business people to coach in demanding contexts through its fully accredited Business Coach Programme, and innovative Elements Programme which equips leaders with enhanced capability to coach "in the day job". Meyler Campbell also hosts Europe's most dynamic learning community for business coaches and leaders.

The Meyler Campbell Annual Lecture is an opportunity for business coaches to listen to new thinking by a world expert from a related field. Past speakers include Dr. Simon Jenkins, Principal Lecturer in Sports Coaching from the Carnegie Faculty at Leeds Metropolitan University; Dr Geoff Bird from the Department of Psychological Sciences at Birkbeck College, University of London; Professor Shlomo Ben-Hur of IMD; Professor Carol Kauffman of Harvard University and one of America's leading academics and thinkers on coaching; Professor Felicia A Huppert, Director of CIRCA (the Cambridge Interdisciplinary Research Centre on Ageing); and Professor Herminia Ibarra, Professor of Organisational Behaviour and The Cora Chaired Professor of Leadership and Learning at INSEAD.