

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CHANGE

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02

CHANGE IS ESSENTIAL OF NEW BEGINNINGS

Change is the essence of a new beginning. In a psychological sense, such a new beginning is marked by changing habits and the difficulty adapting to such new habits. As such, it presents a great challenge to many people, which is why psychologists have dedicated a lot of time to understanding the process.

In this brief exploration of change, I will be highlighting the significance of change not only as a disembodied force, but within the context of R:Ed's own mission to create positive change using methods derived from the lessons of psychology.

DEFINING NEW VALUES

Change is an essential part of work for most NGOs. Addressing themselves to a particular issue in the world, NGOs create a vision for tackling this issue and the guidelines to effect this change. This is a structured and verifiable process, evidenced by content on communication channels, education programs and changes in laws. These are catalysts of change, but not change itself.

For R:Ed, this essence (definition/consolidation) is transparent - our goals are clear and consistent with all UN global development guidelines.

03

THE PROCESS OF CHANGE

The success of the new vision depends on people accepting the new values it prescribes and adopting them into their behaviour. Often this requires a fundamental rethink of a given cultural mindset.

Culture, like community, can be defined as an aggregate of shared values and beliefs. These are often unspoken, and yet they are the chain that links a community together. For this to be sustainable, these shared values and beliefs must therefore be cohesive.

For R:Ed this aspect of change (cohesion) hinges on bridging the gap between Afrocentric and Western perspectives in a way that is compatible with our community's culture.

CHALLENGES TO CHANGE

Simply put, the human brain does not like change. We are conditioned to learn contextually and to develop consistency. Creating change of any kind therefore faces two challenges:

1. Cultural resistance
2. Cultural collapse

Cultural resistance is the norm. The mind objects to change and does not accept it. Such resistance makes it difficult to create isolated positive change (i.e. stopping FGM) whilst preserving cultural homogeneity.

Cultural collapse is the domino effect engendered by powerful cultural change. Such an effect can be seen in cultures like Australian Aboriginals where the loss of a cultural identity has created a more systemic collapse, leading to confusion.

To circumvent these challenges, R:Ed creates an inclusive and unbiased dialogue with its community. We listen to our followers and respond quickly to their cultural context. This allows us to achieve change through assimilation and understanding, rather than prescriptive teaching.

04

THERE ARE 4 ESSENTIAL STEPS TO CREATING CHANGE

STEP 1. DISSEMINATING NEW VALUES

Leon Festinger's groundbreaking 1957 research into cognitive dissonance (i.e. inconsistency of knowledge and action such as a doctor smoking), demonstrated one of the challenges we face in creating change.

Developing lasting cultural change requires us to create a space where a culture's framework can be made consistent with an idea previously thought dissonant. This is a slow process, and rarely achieved by teaching. The new idea must be discussed, reviewed and adapted to fit with the existing cultural framework.

R:Ed's strength lies in its contextualisation. Through its vast content library, R:Ed presents new ideas from a variety of standpoints, including cultural, historical, humanist and economical arguments. Our audience therefore approaches these topics from a place of understanding.

STEP 2. CONFIRMING NEW VALUES

In order for new values to anchor in a culture, they need time to be reinforced, otherwise such a new value is seen only as an exception. This process was confirmed by B.F. Skinner's work on behavioural therapy.

Working with both animals and humans, Skinner demonstrated that new behaviours are only adopted on a permanent basis if we remind ourselves of them regularly.

R:Ed takes care to create multiple touchpoints for the ideas and values it champions. Our community not only engages with these ideas in the content library, but in every communication. This process helps normalise our values through consistent engagement with them.

05

STEP 3. CONSISTENT ROLE MODELS

People like to model themselves on others, following the ideologies and values of those they find admirable and worthy of imitation. Such role models may be celebrities, but more often in the African context, such a role model will be their family and elders.

For change to be accepted, a large section of the community, including such role models, must see its positive implication and act on it. If this does not happen, an in-group (new values)/out-group (old values) dynamic emerges, which usually privileges the old values.

As mentioned previously, it is R:Ed's contextual communication that makes its message work. Community leaders as well as younger readers will find the path to change easier using R:Ed.

STEP 4. DIRECTING NEW BEHAVIOUR

The difference between child and adult learning is immeasurable. Children learn by being taught. By contrast, adults need to integrate new norms into their existing context and value structure. This takes time, reasoning and dialogue.

For a value to take hold, it needs to feel reasonable. Outsiders prescribing such a value is therefore less effective, because it needs to be understood on a more fundamental level.

R:Ed works along these long time frames. Change is not affected overnight, so we tailor our content to provide consistent guidance over a long period.

06

C. IMPLEMENTING BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

Assuming all the above points have been observed, it is important to include as many people as possible to create change in a community. This confirms positive change through coherence.

R:Ed is Africa's largest independent social media page with reach to 10M users every week. We are 100% transparent in our pursuit of positive change, focusing on young adults in the 16-25 age group.

Our work follows 10 guidelines:

1. Top-down oversight
 - a. Frequent monitoring and reviewing of content to meet quality standards
2. Frequency of communication
 - a. Values need to be reinforced consistently and often
3. Positivity
 - a. We share positive stories and champion our users
4. Sustained interest
 - a. We approach topics from a variety of angles instead of following a 'one post and done' mentality
5. User insight
 - a. We take care to analyse user behaviour so that get more insights into our community
6. Dialogue
 - a. We create dialogue on a topic, we do not force an opinion
7. Creating connections
 - a. We foster user engagement with ourselves and each other
8. Creating pride
 - a. We create strong community and cultural pride
9. Increasing inclusion
 - a. We encourage change by showing it from a variety of cultural contexts
10. Afrocentrism
 - a. Our content focuses on African matters from an African perspective

We are looking forward to working with you.