CSAP Center for Substance Abuse Prevention

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SOCIAL CHANGE

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Can a small group of people who see and respond differently to the world make a difference? Indeed, history shows it is the only thing that ever has.

Margaret Mead

Human beings are social creatures with a need to belong, to identify with others. Our natural human environment consists of social systems - interactive, interdependent groups sharing important concerns. We associate ourselves with multiple groups — e.g., family, school, community, workplace - all of which grow and change over time. Like individuals, social systems change - adapt and grow - or they risk becoming unsuccessful or dysfunctional.

Adaptation and direction

The key to successful adaptation and growth is to plan for change so that changes are proactive rather than reactive. Planned social change, then, is a logical approach to implementing significant changes in the structure or function of our social systems.

Successful efforts begin by taking the big picture into consideration, seeking long-range growth and health rather than finding a "quick fix." Planned change implies direction - a vision for the future for the neighborhood or community. If you were to imagine five or ten years into the future, how would you like for your community to be? What would be different? What would be the same? How are your ideas similar to and different from the ideas of your friends and neighbors? Even when change is desired it is not always comfortable. It requires us to give up what we've become accustomed to, the status quo, for something that is uncertain and often quite different from what we've previously known. The discomfort of change often causes community members to deny the need for change, resist the need for change, or rationalize desires in order to remain as we are rather than experience the distress of change.

Strategies for Social Change

Resistance is a natural part of the change process, yet we can initiate social change in ways that reduce or avoid it by using these three types of strategies:

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- Power strategies bring about change by imposing punishment or consequences. For example, passing a city ordinance establishing a fine for selling beer to minors is a power/environmental tactic. Such strategies aim for behavior change rather than a change in attitudes or beliefs. Using power tactics requires enough resources to provide enforcement, and may bring about behavior change quickly, especially when combined with other strategies.

- Persuasion strategies create change by convincing us of an alternate and more socially acceptable behavior. These tactics urge us to identify with a new group norm as we become convinced the norm has changed. For example, one of the most persuasive public campaigns around drinking and driving aired the message "Friends don't let friends drive drunk." This kind of campaign illustrates how persuasive messages lower our resistance to change by assuring us of our group identity and acceptance.

- Education strategies bring about change by offering information, knowledge, and/or skills. While this strategy is often slow to bring about change, the effect tends to be long-lasting because attitudes, values or beliefs have shifted. Early Surgeon General's warnings on cigarette packages are an example of an education tactic. Although it took awhile to get past the denial and rationalization, the validity of the link between smoking and cancer is now generally accepted and has become part of our overall identity as non-smokers.

Each of the categories - power, persuasion, and education - is valid and useful. The most effective campaigns typically employ all three.

Helping change take root and grow

Planned change takes time. After all, it is people who create social change, and it takes time to communicate new ideas among people and even longer for those ideas to become accepted. Regardless of the strategy employed

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in social change efforts, the odds of successful change implementation increase if:

- people see its advantages
- it does not violate existing values or customs or it establishes new ones
- it is understandable and usable
- it is easily tried
- its results are visible to others

For a new idea or behavior to take root and grow throughout a social system all groups/constituencies must be included in planning and implementation. One promising approach to achieving the acceptance of new ideas or behaviors is through developing community coalitions.Coalitions are a group of people committed to working together to address community change through mobilizing around a shared vision of the future. Successful coalitions involve people from across the community (racial/ethnic groups, age, gender, business, industry, etc.) including opinion leaders who can effectively communicate the message within groups in the community.

While the word collaboration is a popular "buzzword" it is also often misunderstood in concept. Collaboration requires people from across the community to engage with each other beyond cooperation to co-labor together in addressing community needs. Collaboration is a critical underlying principle of planned social change that maintains communications networks, makes possible the efficient use of resources, protects vulnerable groups, allows opportunities for leaders to emerge, and ensures the most rapid and widespread acceptance of change. Planned social change is by definition a group process. By including representatives from all constituencies in the community, we ensure that the change process is successful and humane.

Resources on Planned Social Change

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