

## Change and the individual – what makes it stick?

Happy New Year, Birthday, new month, new financial year...! Eat less, exercise more, listen more, care more, wish more, try harder, focus, be yourself (more)... Whether your interest is at the level of the person, team, organisation, sector, nation or international, if you have a stake in 'making change happen' you may be curious about the murky process of *how* it happens. The messy to-ing and fro-ing of personal change has long interested me. If all change starts as an incoherent thought in someone's head, what makes the thought stronger and ultimately so compelling to that person, that they 'stick' with it?

This brief, informal research aims to stimulate debate amongst those of us with a stake in helping people change. What do we think makes the difference, and how much do we agree?

The confluence of a swathe of competitive, owner, consumer, cultural and personal pressures make sustained personal change at work more important: Owners and consumers of organisations want improved performance (though for different reasons); deregulation and globalisation of markets have led to greater competition, adaptation and transformation. Culturally, for many in the West, more choice over career options equals greater individual responsibility to make the right decisions for ourselves. For better or worse, it is the era of personal fulfilment, with the excitement, energy, angst, risk and self-doubt that goes with choice.

With help from Training Zone (<http://www.trainingzone.co.uk>) I set out to look at the views of a sample of 'seasoned' learning professionals. What degree of consistency would there be between people who'd been working in this field over a significant time? I asked **two questions**:

*"1. In your experience, what is the single most important factor in helping a person make a change so that training/learning 'sticks' and is sustained over time?"*

*2. For how many years have you worked on people development? (This may include roles as a manager, trainer, consultant, or member of a formal Human Resources / Training/Development / Learning department.)"*

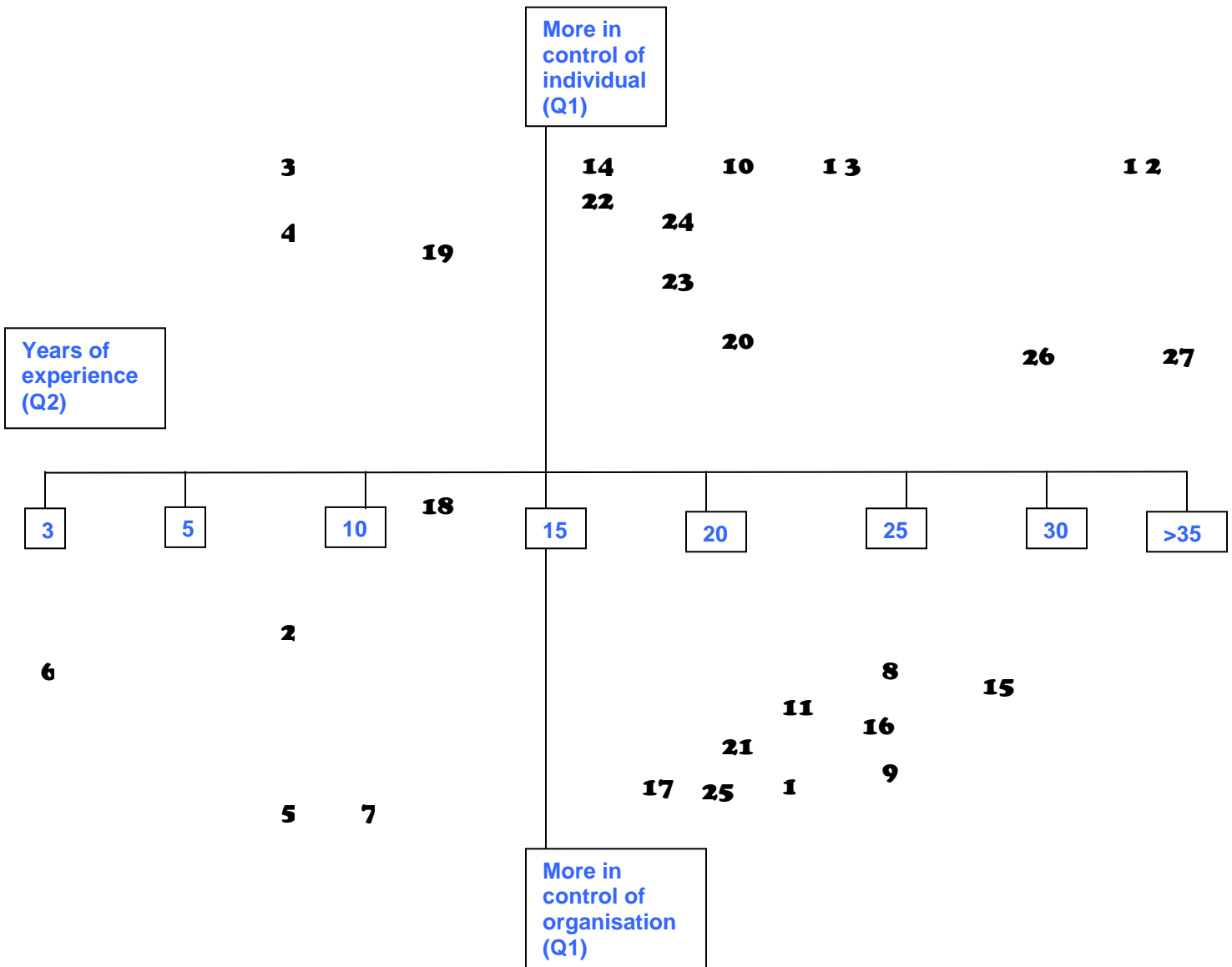
22 people replied, with 27 responses. Some couldn't make up their mind about what single factor matters most, and chose more than one. I included all replies.

**What follows is split into three sections: First**, the results and the interpretation; second, a summary of the Theory of Intentional Change, by Richard Boyatzis –a contributor to this survey. Third, the practical implications for us as learning professionals.

### 1. Results and interpretation

On the chart below, the dark numbers represent the 27 different views. I plotted these responses onto two axes.

- a) The vertical one displays people's views on Q1:... *the single most important factor in helping a person make a change...* and shows whether these are more *controllable from the individual's or organisation's view*. (How far up or down the vertical scale I chose to place responses is my judgement. You may disagree.)
- b) The horizontal axis shows answers to Q2: the number of years' experience of the respondents.



**Summary of the responses.** (See verbatim comments at the end of the report.)

Response and description	Response and description
1. A sincere manager who gives feedback	15. Practice in training room before 'real' world
2. Opportunities to practice, make mistakes...	16. Use in workplace successfully post-training
3. Will to change and practice	17. Fear of unpleasant consequences
4. Confidence to give it a go	18. Be challenged to consider costs/benefits of remaining as one is/changing
5. Line manager active involvement	19. Change desired 'fits' with self-identity
6. Have pivotal experience in training room	20. Learning is congruent with valued experience
7. Support from key person	21. Getting people to recognise need for change
8. A 'real' need identified by a good process	22. Person 'gets' need for change at emotional level – as part of their valued identity.
9. Early consolidation and application post-learning	23. Having realistic and desirable end result
10. Motivation – what's in it for them	24. Commitment and practice
11. Practical training with follow-up tasks	25. Put into practice what has been learnt
12. Someone wants to change/sees how they can	26. Person has a somatic, energetic response – they know they've changed.
13. Knowing it'll improve something important to them	27. The development of a person's vision
14. Personal motivation, reason to change	

## Understanding the results.

As you can see, the views are very broad as to what sustains personal change. A summary:

- Views are balanced evenly across the *individual or organisational control* dimension. There is not much agreement between people.
- The range of views do not vary with amount of experience. From 3 years to 28 years of people-development experience, the views are wide and varied.
- However, people with 30 years or more experience cited factors that seem more ‘controllable’ by individuals, or, at least, need more tailoring to the individual.
- There may be a difference in views between those helping others to change from within an organisation, and those trying to help, based on the outside – as consultants. This was a surprise to me, and I hadn’t intended to look at it. However, since I know many of the people involved, I was able to categorise their responses. For example, 9 out of 12 responses from people with largely ‘internal’ experience emphasise factors more within the organisation’s control. Those based outside had widely varying views.

What to make of it? First, a caveat. This is not intended to be a statistically representative survey, the results of which can be generalised to a wider population. The aim is to shed light on what we believe makes most difference to successful personal change.

With views so varied, what expertise can we claim in the process of aiding personal change? Are there any fundamental principles worth knowing?

## 2. Theory of Intentional change

Part of the unpalatable truth is that we know very little about the lived experiences – the *how* of people change. One of the pioneer thinkers in this field is Richard Boyatzis, from Case Western Reserve University in Ohio.

Using research from nearly 40 years of studies of individual and organizational change, Boyatzis (2006) found that there are few models or theories of *how* individuals change and develop in sustainable ways, (with a couple of exceptions: Prochaska et al., 1992; McClelland, 1965).

*Intentional change theory* looks at changing aspects of actions, habits, competencies, feelings, dreams or aspirations. It is “intentional” in that the person concerned wants the change to occur; finally, the change must endure for a relatively long period of time.

Boyatzis concluded that adults learn what they want to learn:

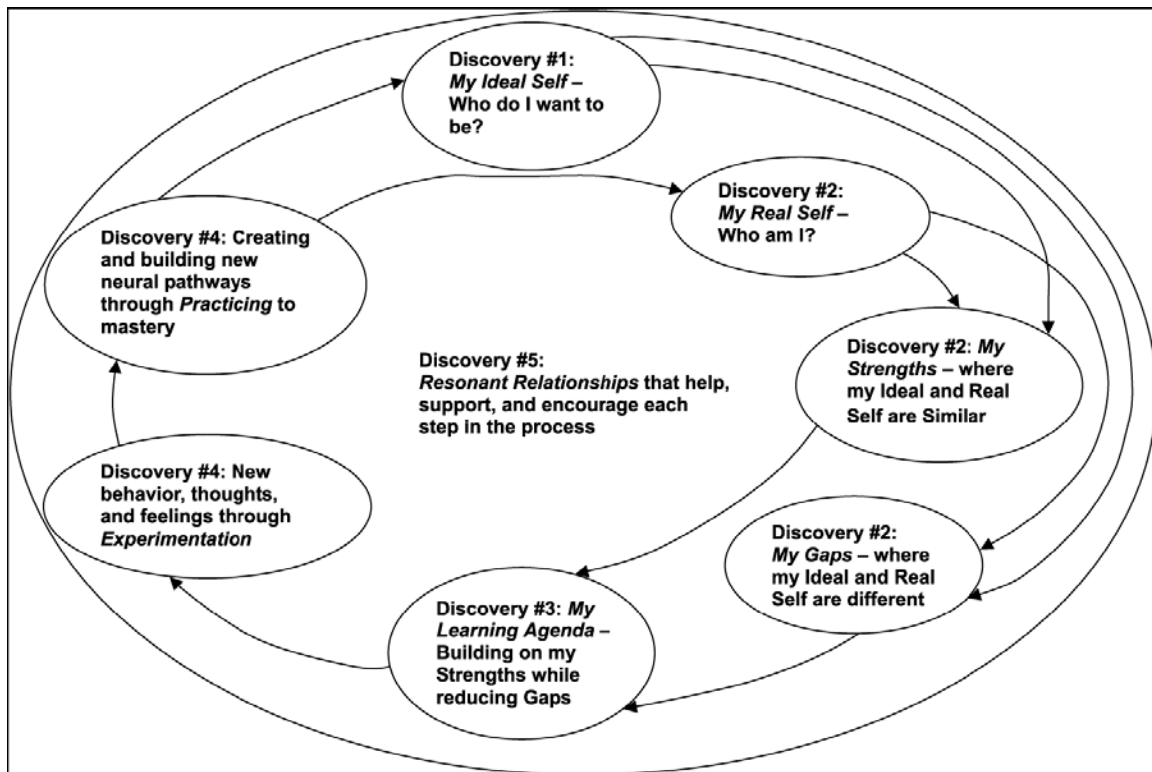
“Students, children, patients, clients, and subordinates may act as if they care about learning something, go through the motions, but they proceed to disregard it or forget it – unless, it is something which they want to learn.” (2006, p 609)

Boyatzis and his team at Case Western used Intentional change theory to give the basis for a series of programmes for change in the early to mid-1990s. The results were impressive.

- **Full-time** MBA students showed 47 percent improvement, on competencies like self-confidence and on self-management competencies, in the one to two years to graduation compared to when they first entered. When it came to social awareness and relationship management skills, improvements were even greater: 75 percent improvement on competencies such as empathy and team leadership
- **Part-time** MBA students also showed dramatic improvement: 67 percent improvement in self-awareness and self-management competencies and 40 percent improvement in social awareness and social skills competencies by the end of their MBA program.

- **The improvement ‘stuck’.** Two years after they had graduated, they still showed improvements in the same range: 63 percent on the self-awareness and self-management competencies, and 45 percent on the social awareness and relationship management competencies.
- **Age didn’t matter in making change ‘stick.** In the above examples, the average age was 27. However, on an executive education program at the Weatherhead School of Management), 45-55 year old professionals and executives improved on self-confidence, leadership, helping, goal setting, and action skills.
- **The process is different for individuals:** Boyatzis learned that change wasn’t a sequential, predictable process, but was based on a number of ‘discoveries’ for individuals, shown *in the diagram below*. People can, and do, start at different points:

**Diagram 1**



- 1) Discovery 1 involves the person creating a vision for his/her ideal self. Boyatzis considers this a crucial stage. He responded to this survey – his view is number ‘27’ in the results table above.

*“The development of a person’s vision is the single most important element in the change process. Without it, sustainability is unlikely.”*

**In my experience, very few organisations include this element as a significant part of a development programme.** This stage is future-focused, and, done well, creates an intensely emotional engagement for the individual that can help sustain their effort to change. (10 comments in the survey came in this category.)

- 2) The 2<sup>nd</sup> discovery is in understanding the real self, including clarity on what s/he likes about him/herself, as well as aspects to change. We need a solid base of strengths from which to consider our development areas/weaknesses. **(My reading, so far, of Boyatzis’ view is that personal vision matters most, identifying strengths next, and development areas third. Many programmes focus primarily on areas of weakness for individuals.)** (3 survey comments in this category.)

- 3) The 3<sup>rd</sup> discovery involves creating a learning agenda that focuses on the future. Weatherhead MBAs students chose what to develop! Ownership is key. (1 comment in this category.)
- 4) Next, experimentation with practice of the desired behaviours. A creative stage, not necessarily involving training courses, and tailored to the person. Experimentation and practice are most effective when they occur in conditions in which the person feels safe. (10 survey comments in this category.)
- 5) Finally, resonant relationships that help. This could be line manager, coach, mentor, buddy... Relationships do not propel the individual towards a personally meaningful future, but they help prevent relapse. (3 comments in this category.)

### **3. Implications for learning professionals**

I'm mainly interested in those changes in habits of thought and behaviour that relate to emotional intelligence – the body of work developed to distinguish between average and superior performers. Here are my views and wonderings about what this short research has shown.

- ***A compelling, emotionally-engaging personal vision is the single most important factor in driving sustainable personal change.*** As learning and change professionals we need to insist more strongly on this element where the 'change' in question has an emotional-intelligence component. We should also tailor programmes flexibly enough to accommodate the diversity of participant needs.
- Why don't we? "Unpredictability" and "lack of control" are not words that organisations like to hear. And perhaps consultants don't like to give... When the potential messiness and individuality of the change process encounter an anxious and busy line manager seeking guarantees of increased organisational performance...that's an awkward moment. Too many of us play safe, and conform to designs we privately suspect can only have limited impact and 'stickability'.
- Once personal 'will' is acknowledged as being critical for sustained personal change, there will be much more interest in the question of what drives 'will', driven by the wish to control it...! It's our role as learning and development helpers to point out that control attempts will be necessarily counter-productive.
- In this short survey, plenty of experienced people believe that factors more within organisational control matter more in sustaining a change. Is this because it's easier to 'tweak' environmental conditions than to 'change' the person on receiving end? Better to 'get busy' by tinkering with the tinkerable...?
- Many of the factors mentioned focus on the 'visible' parts of the change process: a helping 'other' – line manager, or trainer; practice after the learning event... Personal visioning is, well, more personal, and less transparent. Perhaps pressures for demonstrable value-added force us to identify the public, view-able aspects of the process. The change that matters most is largely in the individual's mind. Let's safeguard the time and individual freedom for this.

For me, that's the tightrope: balancing pressing, important organizational needs, with careful matching to individuals with their glorious idiosyncracies. Challenging and fascinating!

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## References:

Prochaska, J.O., DiClemente, C.C. and Norcross, J.C. (1992), "In search of how people change: applications to addictive behaviors", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 47 No. 9, pp. 1102-14.

McClelland, D.C. (1965), "Toward a theory of motive acquisition", *American Psychologist*, Vol. 20 No. 5, pp. 321-33.

Richard E. Boyatzis (2006), "An overview of intentional change from a complexity perspective", *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 25 No. 7, pp. 607-623

## The answers (verbatim):

"1. A manager who sincerely supports the mutually agreed upon changes via evidenced based feedback on a consistent basis. 22 years

2. The first thing is opportunity - opportunity to put it into practice (this also means necessity to put it into practice), opportunity to make mistakes and not be blamed for them, opportunity to receive feedback on what went well/didn't go so well (so that the learning cycle is complete)

3. The second thing is around will - the motivation to want to change and take up the opportunity to put it into practice.

4. Linked in with this is the confidence to give it a go.

5. Having written the above I'm now wondering whether the line manager is the most important factor as they have a key role to play in providing the opportunity (as I've described it above) and in encouraging the individual to give it a go (where necessary turning it into a have to do, so that the skill is used) and help build their confidence (which also links into the feedback and freedom to make mistakes). I realise that line manager involvement in the impact of learning and development is a bit of a hot topic at the moment (ref CIPDs Learning and the line's report). I do think the line manager is important but I also think that the learner has a key role to play in this too! 8 years now

6. I think it is actually having them make the click in the class itself. Typically through some sort of simulated experience. A group exercise, a presentation, an individual challenge. I tend to have students tell me about some good results when they are acting on behavioral based feedback they received during the class itself. I also think some students relate to stories they hear the trainer tell and make an instant link with their own experience. Helps them relive their own experience. My strongest success has been with presentation skills – students practice presenting and get filmed. They receive a lot of feedback. What I do is just focus on 1-2 key points of things they could do better. Giving them too many "learning" points only confuses them and reduces the effectiveness. 3 years

7. I think to change we need support from a key person e.g. feedback and challenges. What gets in the way of behaviour change is our habits, scripts and 'comfort zones'. Although motivation to change (what's in it for me), regular practice in the change, clear goals around what might be different and visualising new behaviour all help; it's support that will intervene when a person lacks the objectivity to see their own blind spots. Approx 10 years.

8. A real need, with the opportunity to apply the learning. Too often, people attend training for the wrong reasons. Either, it is "mandatory" (per HR) so they must attend it. The motivation to learn is not there so all you get is the quantitative attendance indicator, but no real learning outcome. Conversely, we get the "I've heard it's good" approach, when people will attend a class because it might be valuable. Again, there's no real commitment to learn, and frequently, people with this attitude will cancel or no-show, creating bureaucracy for the training organization.

The "real need" implies a level of self assessment against a specific desired set of skills or competencies, and a sense of accountability in acquiring the skills in order to improve performance or knowledge, or to progress within the organization. A good example is something like "project management"....the person who is about to run their first project will probably attend a suitable workshop - there is a need, they are keen to learn, and they get the immediate

opportunity to put their new skills into practice. I once attended a microsoft course on creating web-pages because I thought it would be useful. I had no need to apply the learning and 3 months later, had forgotten everything. 25 years

9. Supported consolidation and application of that learning within the first few weeks after the learning activity. Obviously this varies with the individual and the subject matter, but in general terms it is the support (and challenge) from the line manager, mentor or buddy. This involves helping the person to clarify just what behaviour change looks like for them in their context, encouragement to experiment or try out the behaviour, constructive feedback and advice, and the simple act of showing a genuine interest the person as well as the performance. 25 years.

10. Motivation - the what is in it for them. generally they need a very strong motivation to have a reason to change a habit - for in my experience all behaviours are habits and habits are difficult to change without trauma. 20 years this year!

11. Making the training practical with tasks and build in follow-ups after 1 and 3 months to check progress/tweak the plan of action 22 years

12. I think that what matters most is that someone wants to change and then sees how they can. 34 years

13. Knowing how it will improve something that is important to them ... 23 years

14. Personal motivation/reason/insight/reward to change/develop. 15+ years)

15. In my experience it is essential that the trainee has the opportunity to practice, and hopefully perfect, the desired change in behaviour in the risk free environment of the training room before adopting it in the 'real world'. So often a trainee learns the theory of a particular behaviour (e.g. how to be assertive, how to negotiate) but is reluctant through fear of going into the unknown to adopt that behaviour or having attempted it for the first time and having not found the change comfortable or entirely successful quickly reverts to their old behaviour. 28 years

16. Using the training successfully in the workplace immediately after the training completes. 20 odd years

17. Fear (of unpleasant consequences if they don't make the change) 17 years.

18. Two factors. (1) Do the benefits of the change really outweigh the costs? Have people really thought through the payoff they receive for being the way they are (they must be getting some payoff, and have they thought about the cost of not getting it if they change!). Unless they have been challenged to consider these factors and truly consider the payoff and costs of staying as they are then "something the just can't put their finger on" will continue to stop them from paying the price necessary.

19. Q1: (2nd factor). I read something recently about 'identity' being crucial to change, and I have since applied it in some coaching sessions. Based on the work of a chap called DILTS, the principles are that people act in a way to support their identities (e.g. I go to the gym because I am a person who cares about my body). Unless people internalise an identity which supports the desired changes in behaviour then they won't change their behaviour. 11 years

20. I'm not sure if there is one single factor that always works, but if there was, for me I think it is where an experience follows on from the new learning that confirms what you have been told. For example you may remember the coaching exercise where someone is trying to master a new skill and initially is given negative feedback and the person doesn't master the skill, but then when there is a shift to positive feedback the new skill is achieved. In this instance you're told that positive feedback is better and then you have an experience that confirms it. I think that is effective because in general we trust our own experience and use it as a reference point, so if it becomes part of our experience we tend to trust it as true. When I looked back on my own learning I think that tends to be true, certainly with the things I'm consciously aware of having learned. About 20 years

21. Possible the most critical success factor to achieving sustainable change, in my opinion, is getting those involved to recognise the need to change. This isn't always as easy as it sounds. However, until the need for change is recognised it will be resisted. The solution seems to apply the 3 Rules of Change i.e. 'Communicate..communicate...communicate' (I'm sure I've heard something similar from someone else). You should communicate the reasons for change, the consequences of not changing and the role that people play within the process. In other words communicate about everything as much as you can. Evidence suggests that waiting to communicate the 'right things at the right time' only results in unofficial communication/rumour gaining greater influence. Over a period of 20 years.

22. The above happens when the person GETS 'the why' of the change at a deep personal internal level. The implication in here is that the person experiences a shift perhaps at values/beliefs level about the cause-effect of particular patterns / outcomes they are running / getting / want to get. For example really 'getting' the impact of shouting at people and how it is not bringing them results they would intend, and WHY something else is more appropriate.

When I say 'getting' I mean insight, experiences (or even a therapeutic moment) where they have these realisations at an emotional level. I'm a great believer in Dilts's logical levels. For behaviour change to stick a shift is required at the higher levels e.g. beliefs, values or identity.

So in NLP terms: things like resolving a parts conflict ('part of me just wants to shout at them'), re-framing a problematic association ('that's what my dad did') or experience that is driving the 'old' behaviour or pattern, or putting themselves in 2<sup>nd</sup> position to gain the insight: 'oh my god do I really come over like that!', etc etc etc all techniques to access beliefs/emotional shifts. These then can all be integrated by a little 'future pacing' i.e. imagining (V, A, K) (rehearsing) new patterns in upcoming situation. Of course this is the NLP 'lens' for viewing the question, however even if the training / learning is not NLP style, I believe this is the stuff of sustained change even if you don't describe it with NLP language.

Even for a 'time management' technique to stick on a traditional (old style) TM course, the individual I believe has to 'get' the technique and it's outcomes at an emotional level – i.e. they believe and feel positive about it's outcomes for them (vs their previous pattern). 15 years

23. Having a realistic and desirable end result.

24. Actually I need 2 choices, because without commitment & practice (EI) it will never happen. 23 years

25. Being able to put into practice what has been learned. 20 years plus.

26. The person having a somatic experience – i.e. a significant energetic response in their body to something learned. This could be being made to feel uncomfortable or challenged out of their familiar understanding; or to 'see' something differently for the first time; or to make a deep inner connection to their 'knowing' field. In other words after this learning they are different and they know they are different (bodily) - it is not just a cognitive thing. 30 years

27. The development of a person's vision is the single most important element in the change process. Without it, sustainability is unlikely. Most training and development programs overlook this and assume that a person wants to get ahead in the organization or maximize performance in their current job. Neither is true most of the time unless we engage people and inspire them. **40 years**, I started my first studies and training programs in 1967.