



The Prime Mindset

The same message delivered by different people might result in different outcomes. One explanation for this variance is the style and mindset of the change agent (instructor or counselor). Establishing a supportive relationship with participants is essential to helping them to make changes that can enhance their lives. Adopting a *Prime Mindset* allows change agents to establish a climate which promotes these changes.

Research on how people change informs us on how we can deliver a message with the greatest likelihood recipients will hear it, accept it, and act on it. By Prime Mindset we mean that we have so thoroughly integrated the principles of persuasion and Motivational Interviewing that they have become “second nature.” As the Prime Mindset develops, we typically approach participants in a way that is naturally supportive and persuasive in words, tone, and relationship. Some of the key characteristics of the Prime Mindset are:

1. Focus on the client
 - a. Know where you want to go but start with where the other person is.
 - b. Exemplify the “Like-Like Rule”
2. Avoid provoking defenses
 - a. Be nonjudgmental
 - b. Listen with empathy
 - c. Internalize the Paradox of Change
3. Use Motivational Interviewing skills
 - a. Use reflections; particularly deeper ones
 - b. Reinforce change talk
 - c. Avoid reinforcing sustain talk
4. Occasionally use McGuire’s persuasion process
5. Be Credible and Trustworthy (attain competency)

Focus on the client

Know where you want to go but start with where the other person is.

The cardinal principle of persuasion and Motivational Interviewing is to begin where the other person is (McGuire, 1947; Bostrom, 1983; Hogan, 1996; Miller & Rollnick, 2013). Beginning where people are in terms of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors reduces defenses and opens them to considering change.

Exemplify the “Like-Like Rule”

The like/like rule means participants perceive we like them and are like them. Participants are more open to change if they perceive we genuinely like them. This cannot be faked but can be conveyed in part through eye contact, a welcoming greeting and a handshake, listening, calling them by name, smiling, and a respectful tone.

Participants are also more open to change if they perceive we are like them, or similar to them in some important way. This is not likely to be conveyed on a superficial level. The most effective way we can project this is through accurate empathy. When we accurately reflect back to people what is true for them, they then experience we are enough like them to understand them.

Avoid provoking defenses

Another critical dimension of persuasion is to avoid provoking defenses. Most participants have a well-developed defense system. To promote change it is important to avoid *provoking additional defenses*. We can avoid unnecessary defense by being nonjudgmental, listening with empathy, being patient and not trying to control people's behavior.

Be nonjudgmental

Tone of voice, facial expressions, and words can convey a sense of judgment or non-judgment. We can select our words carefully to avoid provoking defenses. Using non-judgmental words and phrases assists in keeping defenses manageable. Words such as "you, alcoholic, addict, bad, unhealthy, or wrong" are replaced with "we, a person with alcoholism or addiction, and high-risk choices."

Listen with empathy

Listening with empathy often does not come naturally. When refined, it allows us to look through the eyes of others, see the world as they see it, and understand the struggle that accompanies change. Listening with empathy validates that the participants' insights are important and engages them to continue as they struggle with contemplating change.

Internalize the paradox of change

There is a paradox we encounter when working with people who are making high-risk choices. If we want to assist people in changing, we must be willing for them to reject change and continue their same behaviors. If we attempt to tell participants what to do, or push, the participants are more likely to resist. The goal is to gently raise a mirror of reality, so the participants internalize the information in such a way that they decide to make changes.

Use persuasion process (McGuire)

Utilization of McGuire's Persuasion Process to keep resistance manageable and influence motivation for change is a valuable skill (McGuire, 1947). The process involves four steps:

1. *Draw out the common view or belief*
2. *Validate the reasonableness of the common view.*
3. *Gently provide new information which challenges the common view*
4. *Offer a new view*

This process is woven through the words and sequence of the Prime For Life[®] curriculum and is also a helpful tool when managing resistance in any program. When a resistant statement occurs, many change agents perceive this as negative. We will encourage change agents to view resistance as a positive accompaniment to change. Resistance is a sign the person is internalizing the possibility of change. Change does not occur without some level of resistance. The key is to manage it, while keeping the person or group open to new information and defenses down.

We adhere to Block's definition of resistance as a predictable, natural, emotional reaction against change (Block, 1981). In this view, resistance is seen as a "last gasp" before making change and is viewed very differently from defensiveness. Defenses are actions that mask resistance. Part of the Prime For Life training is teaching people to engage the resistance without engaging or provoking defenses. We engage the resistance when we acknowledge and validate the emotion that is underpinning the defense. This often resolves the resistance sufficiently to keep the resistant person or group engaged in the process of change. Stated differently, resistance is a natural and predictable experience during contemplation. Our job is to stay with the person as they resolve the resistance and avoid provoking their defenses as we do so. For this reason, harsh confrontation is generally counter-productive.

When the change agent finds that new information is needed, it can also be helpful to respond to resistance using McGuire's persuasion process. Participants' comments and concerns are often descriptive of the first step of the persuasion process. They are a representation of a common view or belief. While resisting the temptation to jump immediately to a new understanding (step four) the change agent first meets the participants where they are by validating the reasonableness of the statement or view. Only then is new information gently—and briefly—shared, and a new way of looking at the issue offered.

By using listening, reflecting, and persuasion skills it is less likely we will engage cognitive defenses, and more likely to engage the emotional component of resistance. Change agents using these skills remain calm, pause and remember the resistance is not about them, resist the urge to speak or react to the statement and move with the individual and the rest of the group.

Be Credible and Trustworthy (attain competency)

A body of research indicates change agents are more likely to influence behavior change if they are perceived as credible and trustworthy. One of the ways a perception of credibility occurs is through demonstrating competency. If I am leading a group and attempt to persuade and promote change, but cannot demonstrate competency, *credibility* drops. Delivering the research-based information with fidelity and competency increases the likelihood the information will be believed and applied in people's lives.