

APPLIED CHANGE ABILITIES

A wide variety of skills and abilities are needed to be effective in initiating and directing applied change. This includes those abilities developed in academic training, particularly core knowledge and research methods. But they also involve many abilities NOT often developed systematically in higher education. This is partly due to the focus in academic institutions on theory and methods, and to teachers who lack applied experience and who view life from the perspective of their academic careers. A broad range of skills is needed in applied change, and no one individual has an ideal balance among them. Some abilities are effective in certain situations, and other skills work in different circumstances.

In general, college education is intended to develop a broad range of abilities for being a responsible and active member of a changing society. These are indicated in the IUPUI *Principles for Undergraduate Learning* (<http://www.universitycollege.iupui.edu/UL/Principles.htm>). Some important APPLIED CHANGE ABILITIES include:

Choose Carefully With Whom We Work Many causes are worthy, but groups may or may not be what they seem. Assessing the likely success of our contributions for adaptive social change before becoming involved includes:

- Identifying the true *vested interests* of the group.
- Evaluating how *capable* the group can be in achieving its goals, in terms of its internal functioning.
- Identifying the effective overlaps between *our potentials* and *their needs*.

Human and interpersonal skills Social change involves *people*, and being able to relate and communicate well with others is critical in applied change, including:

- Understanding others' views and feelings.
- Encouraging and motivating others.
- Engendering cooperation.
- Being able to explain clearly ideas and actions
- Being able to constructively resolve stresses and conflicts.

Team Skills Since no person possesses all the skills needed in applied changes, a *team* of people with a variety of abilities is most likely to be effective in making social changes. Being able to work together (which is not always easy for a group of people with strong biases for social change) includes..

- Agreeing, however, on HOW TO WORK TOGETHER, rather than having to agree on perspectives and means.
- Understanding that the benefits of effective collaboration can be more comprehensive, can have greater depth and breadth, and can be more effective and balanced.
- Clarifying roles, responsibilities, and relationships with each other.
- Having a *prior* procedure for resolving stresses and conflicts in working together.

Organizational Skills: Since social change also involves groups and collective action, being able to organize and manage group efforts can contribute to effective outcomes, including:

- Clear decision-making processes.
- Setting clear goals and maintaining a clear group focus.
- Networking contacts and supporters.
- Comprehensive planning of activities and logistics.
- Identifying and delegating tasks.
- Maintaining effective communication lines.
- Coordinating multiple activities.
- Development of resources.
- Administrative and personnel management procedures.
- Conflict management procedures.
- Ongoing evaluation of activities and structures to maximize effectiveness.

Political Skills: Social change automatically involves *vested interests* which engender both allies and opponents (though these may not turn out to be those whom we might anticipate to be for or against our cause). Being effective in mobilizing the socioeconomic power to make changes is critical, including:

- Prior assessment of vested interests
- Building alliances.
- Neutralizing opposition.
- Generating popular support to counterbalance economic and political forces against desired changes.
- Negotiation.
- Lobbying.
- Press relations.

Conceptual Skills: A comprehensive and valid understanding of the CONTEXT of change underlies many other abilities in applied activities, including:

- Understanding SYSTEMS, how different traits and components are integrated and how they influence each other in the functioning of the whole system. Human systems include behaviors, social structures, and environmental conditions.
- Understanding the systems processes of SOCIAL CHANGE itself, *how change works*. This involves identifying achievable goals, assessing the real issues affecting change, identifying the processes and forces that influence change, and evaluating the most effective and adaptive alternatives for change,
- *Recognition* and control of BIASES in seeking effective changes.

Personal Skills: A range of personal abilities also lend themselves to effective involvement in social change, including:

- A balance of social values, flexible pragmatism, and ethical responsibility for actions that affect the lives of others.
- Self-assessment to know what can and *cannot* do well.
- Insightful judgement is, including being able to distinguish *substance* from *image* (what people *do* compared to what they *say*).
- Initiative in personally involvement.

There are many skills and abilities involved in applied change, but these have not really been systematically identified or assessed in the professional literature. This is a limitation in determining what abilities we need to develop in order to be effective in whatever causes and activities we choose to be involved. This also means that we probably do not prepare ourselves adequately to be involved in applied change, and therefore have to learn more from mistakes than prior skill development. This has important implications for academic programs which seek to train people for careers outside academia, but are often poorly developed in fostering those skills.

Students should take the initiative and responsibility in developing their own applied skills and abilities. Since experience is really the best teacher, building your own PRACTICAL LEARNING EXPERIENCES into your professional training through service learning projects and practicums is one of the best ways to maximize the development of relevant applied skills.