

Believing What We Believe

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2008, published April, 2008 in *The Savannah Business Journal*

How do we humans decide what we believe? Is it even a conscious choice?

When individuals staunchly defend their beliefs, I sometimes ask, "How did you arrive at believing that perspective so strongly?" The response is often a quizzical look, one of fresh curiosity. Most people have never thought about *why* they believe what they believe.

My supposition (and I'd love to hear your thoughts) is that there are three general sources for one's beliefs: initial family, repetition, and paradigm shifts. Let's explore each one.

As soon as we are born, our initial family starts explaining the world to us. We learn language through what we hear in our homes. Parents and older siblings explain how things work, how to make things happen, and how to obtain what we want (how to seek an improved condition).

These initial impressions can be later altered, of course, but we never lose the influences gained from our initial family. I'm in my sixties now, yet I can still trace much of what I believe back to what I learned from Mom and Dad--often unbeknownst to them!

As we approach our teens, our peers take over the strong influence once held by our family members. Parents have been concerned about peer pressure since the beginning of time! Why? Because the force of a friend's influence--as our parental influence wanes--is powerful!

It is a time when we claim we want to express our individuality, yet our behavior often shows that our real desire is to "fit in" and be accepted by this new authority. What do we do? We wear the same clothes, listen to the same music, speak the same slang, and enjoy the same foods.

Why, then, would I suggest that the second source of what we believe is repetition rather than peer pressure? Peer pressure is just one example of repetition. When "all the kids are doing it," that's repetition! As we become adults, we call it "keeping up with the Joneses." Habits form because the behaviors (and beliefs) seem to work for us. Other examples of repetition are:
--that song or advertising jingle playing repeatedly in your head,
--your attendance at the same church each week,
--the results of trial-and-error learning (once we "learn," we repeat what works).

The third source of our beliefs is the paradigm shift. "Paradigm" describes the way we see, understand, or explain what happens to and around us. It is what we believe to be "the truth." Then we come across some new information that surprises us. The new perspective doesn't fit with our existing paradigm, and we consider adopting a new belief, a new explanation.

I think that most of our changed beliefs as adults come from paradigm shifts. Teachers of adults share new information in such a convincing fashion that we willingly give up our former view of the world--our previous belief--for a new way of "seeing" the way we experience our world.

You may ask, "So what? What importance does this hold for me?" There are two things that I think are worthy of your consideration. First, I encourage you not to discount your "initial family" as a source of your beliefs, especially those that are underlying and not conscious. Realize also that this is true for all the people under your authority!

Next, if you are in a leadership position, you are limited in your options for influencing the people who look to you for direction. You've gained contact too late for "initial family" to be of much help in formulating beliefs. Also, "command and control" tactics or ordering people around has little impact. No one can force another person to change his or her beliefs.

Sadly, repetition and paradigm shifts are your only viable approaches for altering the beliefs of those you influence. Invite your team members periodically to look anew at what they believe.

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