

Three Constants in the Life of a Leader

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This article provides a synopsis of a 1998 book by Stephen Covey, Roger Merrill, and Dewitt Jones entitled *The Nature of Leadership*.

I purchased this beautiful coffee table book over 15 years ago when I was actively teaching Covey's three-day "Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" course. However, the book long ago found a home in the infrequently referenced section of my library.

A client invited me to watch videos of Dewitt Jones declaring--and supporting photographically--that "There is more than one right answer." I thought I recognized his name as the highly acclaimed National Geographic photographer who produced most of the photos in the book.

Reflecting on Dewitt Jones' video message stimulated me to find the book and take a fresh look. I rediscovered "that the essence of leadership is dealing effectively with the three constants in our lives: change, changelessness, and choice."

So what? Why would this insight drive me to generate one of my routine articles? The coincidence of recent independent experiences with each of the three constants was just too much for me to let pass. I felt certain that you, and especially future clients, would benefit from this perspective.

Here are my three recent incidents. A client raised a question about when he could expect the pace of change to slow. I taught a class in which I referenced the difference between personal values and principles (changelessness). Finally, a client, faced with a tough choice, and I tenaciously generated options and evaluated each relative to his long-term desired outcome.

Change. We live at the crossroads of the past and the future. Once we say the word "now," it has already slipped into the past. Nothing remains the same for very long. If the outside world isn't inflicting fresh challenges upon us, we're creatively concocting some enhancement that we intend to put forward very soon.

My world rotates around the concept of improvement, which is simply a synonym for positive change. When I spoke with my client about his concerns, I sent him a copy of an article I wrote several years ago on the inevitability of change. You can access "When Will All This Change Be Over?" by going to my website (see the address below) and searching alphabetically.

Changelessness. Ah, what a paradox. Though we live in a world of constant change, we also live in an orderly universe. If it were not so, physics, chemistry, and math--our made-up methods for explaining the natural world--would not be worth studying. There is order in complexity. Weather changes, the tides change, opinions change. Yet there are repeatable, predictable patterns.

You can violate a manmade law and perhaps get away with it. Violating a natural law evokes some kind disappointment if not outright pain. The book identifies several changeless principles of human interaction. I share three of them here.

"Interdependence" is the reality in which we live. Businesses, families, and communities cannot exist as independent parts separate from the whole. Violating the principle means impending doom.

"Growth" is a characteristic of all living things. When a natural organism stops growing, it's dying.

"Resistance" provides us with the opportunity to build strength and prevent atrophy. Without the constraint of its banks, for example, a healthy, flowing river would simply be a localized flood.

“Though individual events can’t always be predicted, the pattern can be predicted. If you think in terms of principles, and exercise faith in the result, they will eventually come to pass.”

Choice is the fundamental tool of leadership that allows us to handle the changelessness and change we encounter. We lead our own lives through the choices we make. Some of us have the additional privilege and responsibility of influencing significantly the experiences of others.

Wise leaders realize that each individual has the freedom to make his or her own choices. When humans choose to pull together toward a common objective, the effect can be awesome.

Although we cannot always control what happens to us, we can always choose our response to what happens to us. When we fail to choose, or if we choose poorly, we fall victim to the constancy of change and the relentless nature of changelessness. None of us intentionally chooses to be a victim; it is an unintended outcome of failing to address directly this final constant, our freedom to choose.

As a leader, respect all three of these constants in your life and in the life of your organization. Learn all you can about changelessness (principles) so that you can make wise choices about the changes thrust upon you and about the changes you are considering initiating.

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