Wants, Not Needs

A Key Part of the Evolution of FIRO Theory

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The purpose of using Element B: Behavior and other instruments is to help people increase their self-awareness and enable them to make changes in their behavior. The way that we, as facilitators and coaches, work with people to help them understand their psychometric scores and create change is crucial. How effectively we do this is driven by our training and experience and by the structure of the instruments themselves. In its original formulation, FIRO theory was posited as a "theory of interpersonal needs," and FIRO-B was designed to reflect this. Years of experience, however, showed that this wording limited people's growth.

A Practical Assumption

Our job as facilitators, coaches, and consultants is to help people change their behavior and make improvements in their work outcomes. We really do not know if or how much people need inclusion, control, and openness, so it is more helpful to assume that people want some amount of each of these. In Will Schutz's words, "it is much more valuable to assume you have the capacity to change anything you do not like about your behavior, if you allow yourself to learn how." This reorients problem solving by keeping people focused on their own role in their lives. In other words, it pushes people to take ownership of their own behavior and choices.

Will Schutz based The Human Element approach on several underlying principles that he believed were most powerful for creating change in people. Two of these principles, Choice and Limitlessness, are tied to the issue of needs versus wants.

Choice

Choice is a tool for helping people learn more about themselves and the choices they make, both conscious and unconscious. To use it, we make a practical assumption for ourselves: "I assume that I choose everything in my life." This is not to say with certainty that we actually do choose everything—we really do not know if this is true. But, by assuming we choose, we open ourselves to discovering the conscious and unconscious ways in which we are creating our own experience more than we may think we are. For example, if I get into an argument with a co-worker, I may use the tool of choice to explore ways in which I contributed to the situation, thereby helping me become aware of more of my own actions and giving me more control over changing what I do. If I do not assume that I have chosen the situation, I may never look for my own part in it. I may then blame the other person, deny that it is happening, blame outside forces, or avoid dealing with it in some other way.

Choice is also a method of challenging our self-limiting beliefs. For example, if I believe that I do not get along with my boss very well, I tend not to look for the ways in which we do get along. I will focus on all the ways in which we do not, which will reinforce the behaviors that prevent me from looking for ways of improving our relationship. If I use the tool of choice, I will look for my beliefs and actions that have helped to create the situation, probably discover my own limiting beliefs in the process, and possibly uncover new options for solutions.

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Limitlessness

Limitlessness is another practical assumption that helps us grow and achieve our potential. By assuming that all limits are limits of belief, we open ourselves to the possibility of going beyond what has been done in the past. At one time, people believed that it was not possible to run a mile in less than four minutes and that it was not possible to go to the moon. The people who did not believe in these limits were the ones who transcended them. They focused on how to achieve their goals rather than on the limits that prevented them from doing so.

A need is simply a limit. It is the same as saying that we have no choice. It causes us to do some things—"I need to get some fresh air"— and not do other things—"I need to avoid crowds"—and implies that there is nothing that we can do about it. If we assume that we do have choice, that is that we are limitless, then we are motivated to look for things we have not been aware of in order to find new ways of doing things.

We Experience What We Expect To Experience

A recent research study found that more expensive medications relieve pain better, even when they are placebos. In the study, people were given medication for pain and told the "cost" of the medication. Those who received the "expensive" medication had a much greater reduction of pain than those who had received the "cheap" pills. Amazingly, no one in the study got any actual medication. Everyone received placebos.

If people believe that they need harmony or approval or control or money or anything else, then they act, and react both physically and mentally, as if they cannot do without it. When threatened with the possibility of being denied a perceived need, the body's basic defensive reactions—fight, flee, freeze, or appease—are triggered. When people are in these aroused, survival states, the part of the brain that learns new things (the pre-frontal cortex) is not active. However, if people believe that they are capable, trusted, liked, and have opportunities, then they will behave in accordance with those beliefs. They are more likely to be curious, inquiring, open to new possibilities, and accepting of new information. In this state, the part of the brain that learns new things is active.

Disempowerment

Talking in terms of needs disempowers people and takes them out of the driver's seats of their own lives. It is more empowering for us to consider what we want rather than to be told what we need. For example, if I decide that I "need you to apologize," I make myself powerless in the situation. As long as you do not apologize, I am stuck. I give away all control and power to you until you decide to fulfill my "need". Another effect of talking about needs when working with people is that it gives them escape routes. For example, if I have a "need" for quiet in order to do creative work and I am not getting it, then I can claim no responsibility for the outcome. "I need to be left alone in order to be creative. Of course I didn't do as well as I should have." If we do not want to talk about an area in which we feel ignorant, a "need" can give us an easy way to avoid dealing with the issue. "If I had been put in charge, I would have gotten the project done. After all, I need the control in order to function." Once we have identified something as a need, we do not have to examine it further. We can chalk up our deficiencies to not getting our needs met. As practitioners, this is not the reaction we want to produce. The

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conversation tends to focus on limits and restrictions and what we cannot do, rather than about what we can do or any new ideas or possibilities.

The FIRO Instruments

In the early 1980s when Will Schutz revisited FIRO-B, he determined that it was a good instrument that he could make much better. Using the knowledge that he had learned in the two previous decades, he upgraded FIRO theory and the instruments created from it to reflect his new thinking. The change in his thinking about needs versus wants is reflected in the way Element B: Behavior, Element F: Feelings, and Element S: Self-concept were constructed. Specifically, they no longer measure needs, they now measure preferences. The scales are titled, for example:

- I include people.
- I want to include people.

There is no "I need to include people."

In addition, the interpretation has been changed to avoid the idea of a need. "Any score may be either (a) a clear preference, or (b) a rigid, defensive choice, or (c) some of both." People using the instrument are encouraged to explore these possibilities in the spirit of learning more about how they operate, rather than learning about their current beliefs and supposed limitations. Any limit is assumed to be a rigidity—an area where the person is not flexible and resists taking another position. In this way, a need is the same as a rigidity.

Implications for Working with Others

When working with people it is very useful to notice when they talk about needs and when they talk about their own preferences. When a person does not want to talk about something that is anxiety provoking, a need gives an easy way to avoid confronting the issue. A need gives an irrefutable reason for a person's behavior, and thus becomes a perfect reason not to examine the ways that he or she is creating the situation. Compare the following two scenarios.

> Meg scored an eight on "I control people." "Yes, that's right," she said, "I have a high need for control because I have very clear ideas of what I want to achieve and I demand the best from my team and of myself." The rest of the team discussed this and agreed with Meg. Though some team members did not like the way Meg ran the group, they agreed that because of Meg's "high need for control" a couple of members should leave the team in order to accommodate her and make the team run more smoothly. As a result of the change the team did run more smoothly, but Meg felt that she had no one who would challenge her ideas appropriately. There was no one left but "yes men." The people who left were upset and felt pushed out of the team.

> Jake scored nine on "I control people." Asked if his nine was simply his preference or if he became rigid, he replied, "well, I really hang on tight to control especially when we're under pressure, so I guess I get pretty rigid on that nine." Asked if he could think of instances where he would control people much less, he said, "oh yeah. When we are brainstorming or working on strategy I love to have other people take the reigns." The team discussed the issue and gave feedback, helping Jake become clearer on the

Exploring *wants* instead of *needs* changes the conversation. *Wants* prompt exploration and inquiry.

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factors underlying his high control score. Eventually, they decided together to make changes to the whole team including the way that power and control were shared that helped the team be more successful.

In the first scenario, Meg's "need" prevented any further exploration of causes and pushed the group immediately to creating solutions, resulting in an unsatisfactory outcome for everyone. Further, Meg's need left her in exactly the same place as before, wanting full control, but also desiring helpful dissent and not getting both.

In the second example, an examination of where Jake became rigid allowed the entire team to work toward a solution that was best for the team. In the process, he became more aware of his own behavioral patterns and was able to change them to help the team perform at a higher level.

Implications for Facilitating

It is important to notice our own underlying feelings as facilitators. Talking about client preferences or desires encourages the client to find his or her own solutions, make his or her own meaning, and take charge of the process of making change. Talking about client needs reinforces the idea that the facilitator is the expert with the answers and that the client is forever reliant on the facilitator for changing—leading to lucrative, long-term business relationships, but not necessarily healthy outcomes. This is the classic doctor-patient model that encourages people to ignore their own bodies in favor of getting "expert" opinions. A useful way to deal with this issue is for the facilitator to do the same work as the client—examine his or her own preferences and desires and to notice when these start to feel like needs. Only through self-examination can we be self-aware enough to drop our own defenses and be fully present for the client without hidden agendas. Real help is truly a fine art.

Summary

Shifting the focus of our conversations from needs to wants can be applied to many different instruments or other change interventions. Recent research confirms that it is best to let people find their own answers and make their own meaning. Instead of telling someone what they are like based on scores from an assessment, it is more effective to give them the basic principles for interpretation and then let them reach their own conclusions about their scores. If we, as facilitators, speak in terms of needs, we are interpreting for them. We are telling them that they have limits—which may or may not be true. If they interpret their own scores, they may discover where they think they are limited and as a result be inclined to question their own beliefs. This is a much more powerful way to help people change their consciousness and their ability to help themselves. By looking at behavior in terms of wants rather than needs, we are able to focus on creative solutions, rather than working around fixed obstacles, thus releasing energy for achieving our goals and experiencing joy in our work.

> **Talking about client *wants* encourages the client to find his or her own solutions and meaning and take charge of the process of making change.**

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