How Attitudes Develop

Psychologists and educators tell us that human beings are learning constantly. The three general types of learning that take place are knowledge, skills, and attitudes. It would be easy to identify the first two types, but have you given much thought to the third type of learning: attitude?

ATTITUDES DEFINED
A simple definition of an attitude is how a person feels about something. If attitudes are a type of learning, then an important part of your personality—the many different feelings you have—is learned. You may or may not be attracted to different people. You may or may not enjoy doing certain things. At a more intense level, you may fear or dislike someone or something.

In another sense, your attitude is the general feeling you communicate to others. You will hear someone say, “He has a bad attitude” or “Her attitude about the project was very positive.”

ATTITUDES AND IMAGE
You are constantly sending signals that others pick up. It is almost as if those around you can “tune in” to your attitudes. Your attitudes can cause people to be drawn to you and have positive feelings (or attitudes) toward you. On the other hand, your attitudes can signal others to avoid you. Your attitudes can cause others to see you as attractive or repulsive in varying degrees. Therefore, the image your friends, coworkers, and even casual associates have of you is what you project by your attitudes.

LEARNING ATTITUDES
Each kind of learning requires a different method or strategy, and what works for one kind of learning may not work for another. A method that might help you memorize the anatomy of an insect may not work to help you learn to swim. You gain knowledge by studying and by using logical and critical thinking abilities. You develop skills by practice and careful repetition of behavior, with demonstration and coaching to help you improve. However, you do not develop attitudes in the same ways that you develop knowledge or skills.

Educators and psychologists who have studied human learning say that emotion is the critical factor in the development of attitudes. Emotions such as fear, joy, anxiety, or compassion seem to shape our feelings about the events in our lives. When emotion accompanies an event time after
time, it creates an attitude or feeling that may be very intense and difficult to change.

**Here is What Happened:**
One of the supervisors came up with the idea of having a “debriefing” after each accident. As soon as an accident happened, all work would stop. The accident victim was required to tell other workers what happened, why, and how it might have been prevented.

There was a dramatic reduction in accidents under that particular supervisor. When these spur-of-the-moment meetings were held in other construction units, the results were the same—a reduction in the frequency of accidents. Where lectures on safety practices in training sessions had failed, the emotionally charged learning that occurred in the debriefing sessions had a powerful effect on the attitudes of the workers.

This example shows that highly emotional experiences can shape attitudes, and those attitudes can effectively influence behavior. These workers had all the knowledge they needed to behave appropriately. What they lacked was the motivation to do what they knew they should. A change in attitudes provided that motivation.

**on the job**

A firm that was involved in heavy construction found that the frequency of accidental injuries was very high. The training program had stressed safety procedures, and the workers were thoroughly acquainted with what they should do to protect themselves from injury. However, simply knowing the safety rules in this case did not cause the workers to behave in a safe manner. The supervisors concluded that while the workers knew what was expected, they simply were not doing it. Some were found to be welding without safety glasses. Equipment was being serviced without being turned off (as safety codes required). Power tools were being operated without shields, and workers were not wearing gloves when they should have been.

The workers knew the rules, but they had not developed the proper attitudes toward them. What was needed was a learning experience that would create a change in how the workers felt about the rules.

Considering the fact that attitudes change and learning new attitudes can best be accomplished in a situation where emotions are high, what might the supervisors do to create positive attitudes and motivation for the workers to follow the safety rules and be safety conscious?

**checkPoint**

1. Three general types of learning are __________, __________, and __________.
2. What works as effective instruction for one kind of learning is likely to work as well for another.  True____  False____
3. An attitude is something you  
   a. visualize.  b. do.  c. know.  d. feel.
4. Attitudes are learned  
   a. in emotional situations.  b. with careful step-by-step instruction.  
   c. by memorization.  d. by coaching and practice.
5. We are likely to be unaffected by the attitudes of those around us.  
   True____  False____
6. It is easy for others to “tune in” to your attitudes.  True____  False____
7. Your attitudes can cause others to see you as arrogant.  True____  False____
8. People are not likely to make positive or negative judgments about someone because of his or her attitudes.  True____  False____
Improve Your Attitudes

It may not be easy, but there is one person you can “get tough with” without fear of reprisal. There is, in fact, one person you can change. That person is you! Changing your own attitudes can be very satisfying. It can also be enlightening.

THREE STEPS TO IMPROVE
Developing positive attitudes and eliminating negative ones is the best kind of reforming you can do. But how should you start? There are no steps for self-improvement that will work for everyone. However, these ideas and suggestions can be helpful if you have the inner strength to put them to the test. Remember, because attitudes are shaped under the stress of emotions, it may take courage for you to try these suggestions. The reward can be a more positive attitude.

Here are three steps in the process of attitude improvement:
1. Identify the attitudes you want to improve.
   It may help to write a brief description of the image you have of yourself after you have achieved your attitude-improvement goals. Keep in mind the image of the kind of person you wish to become. Your mental picture must be so clear and so constantly present that it can create a pattern for your behavior.

2. Resolve to develop those attitudes.
   They are a reflection of your ideal personality. It should be your goal to cultivate those qualities because they are needed as a model for your self-renewal.

3. Use the image of your ideal personality as a model for your behavior.
   By practice and effort, you can make the desirable behavior come naturally, and the improved attitudes will transform your personality.

AVOID THE NEGATIVE
Everyone is negative some of the time. Negative feelings, negative comments, and negative actions are depressors of the spirit. They drag you down instead of lifting you up. You can get up in the morning feeling great, but if you meet four or five friends during the day who tell you of depressing happenings, who complain, or (worst of all) who criticize you or call attention to your mistakes, your happy mood will soon disappear. Fortunately, this works both ways. If you are tired and discouraged, your mood can change when you meet someone who gives you a sincere compliment or greets you with a smile.

Imagine for a moment that you are another person—a person with an attitude problem. You have been having trouble with your supervisor. You feel you have been criticized too much and too often, and you (being human) have tried to get even. Perhaps you were sullen. You may have answered abruptly, or you may have threatened to quit.

Ask yourself what other tactics you might have tried. How would a person with a positive attitude have responded?

For example, you might have said sincerely, “I know I made an error. You were right to tell me about it, and I appreciate it. Is there anything you can suggest or do to help me correct it? I want to improve.”

What response might the supervisor in this situation have?

Even though your supervisor may have been stern and demanding, your remarks would probably have created a positive response. Chances are your supervisor might have said, “That’s all right. I’m sure you can improve. Here is a suggestion about how to handle it next time.”

Even if the response you receive does not match this ideal, why would you still be better off with a positive attitude?