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Review of Allen Tough, *Intentional Changes: A Fresh Approach to Helping People Change*

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Review of Allen Tough, *Intentional Changes: A Fresh Approach to Helping People Change*

Abstract

Intentional Changes is an important book. It suggests different approaches to the way in which we try to implement change. It provides, as do most important books, much that you will disagree with. Tough's conclusions are based on studies that are likely to be unknown to you. The book is interesting, well written, and short.

Comments

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**Book Review: *Intentional Changes: A Fresh Approach to Helping People Change*,
by Allen Tough, Chicago: Follette Publishing Co., 1982.**

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Intentional Changes is an important book. It suggests different approaches to the way in which we try to implement change. It provides, as do most important books, much that you will disagree with. Tough's conclusions are based on studies that are likely to be unknown to you. The book is interesting, well written, and short.

If I am correct, why haven't you heard about this book before? I believe these statements also apply to Tough's earlier book, *The Adult's Learning Projects* (1979), and my guess is that you have not heard about that one either.

Tough's books perhaps are too revolutionary for those in management education. You might like the philosophy (it is similar to that promoted by Carl Rogers), but Tough's books go beyond philosophy. They provide evidence and have implications that are threatening to our traditional approaches to change. From this brief review you can decide whether it might be helpful for any of your own intentional changes.

Tough tried an approach that seldom has been used in research on how people change: he asked them. The bulk of his evidence, then, is based on personal interviews with 150 individuals from 9 locations, 3 each in Canada, the United States, and England. Each person was asked to discuss his or her intentional changes for the two years preceding the interview.

In addition to the survey, Tough drew on a substantial amount of prior research. Although I try to keep up with this literature, this book introduced me to much new research. Much of the literature was in sources that are difficult to obtain. For example, of the 165 sources cited, 2 were unpublished manuscripts, 18 were Ph.D. theses, 11 were proceedings from conferences, and many were in obscure journals or in books published by small publishing houses. (One suspects that research on self-change is more difficult to publish than is research on how to change *others*.) The prior research was brought together in an intuitive yet clear and convincing manner.

Those interviewed did report making changes. Almost all of the 150 respondents reported significant changes, and 31 percent were able to describe "a huge or enormous change" within the two year period. Only 3 percent labeled their changes as "trivial," and only 4 percent were unable to cite any change.

The most common area of change (33 percent of all changes) related to people's jobs. This included changing jobs, learning new responsibilities, changing operations within one's own small business, or gaining competency for certain aspects of jobs. (Interestingly, people with little formal education devoted more of their efforts to job related changes.) Almost all changes were viewed in a positive light. Only 3 percent said that the change "has done more harm than good." The most important findings, in my opinion, related to responsibility for change. People took credit for their changes; they assigned themselves about 70 percent of the credit for choosing, planning, and implementing changes. Although they sought help from others, they generally gave credit to nonprofessionals rather than to professionals. Furthermore, they gave more credit to "one-to-one interaction" than to group interaction. One of the most interesting findings was that professionals in group settings received little credit for choosing, planning, or implementing change (.3 percent, 1 percent, and 2 percent, respectively, on Tough's scale).

It is easy to find alternative explanations for Tough's results. For example, it is known that people often are unaware of how they learn (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977), so why should one believe this survey? Furthermore, the findings by Sigall, Aronson, and van Hoose (1970) that respondents want to cast themselves in a favorable light could explain why they would take the credit for their changes.

Alternative sources of evidence support Tough's findings, however. For example, in his earlier book (Tough, 1979), he found remarkably similar results when people were asked to describe how they learned. Furthermore, Tough cites a wide variety of additional evidence that concurs with the importance of self-responsibility for successful changes.

Perhaps Tough has managed to review the research selectively in an effort to support his case. If that is true, I suffer from the same biases. In my own review of the literature, the conclusion was the same: Existing evidence suggests that people are successful in changing when they view themselves as being responsible for changes, but important changes imposed by others generally are unsuccessful.

The implications of this book are important. They apply to public policy as well as to our roles as change agents or educators. Public policy generally assumes that people cannot be responsible for their own changes. Tuition rebates are provided for formal education, but negligible funds are provided to self-learners. Self-learners who lack a formal education encounter discrimination in the job market. People are prohibited from doing jobs in certain states because they have not followed the prescribed method of learning (generally sitting in a course).

Tough has suggestions for *change agents*. For example, he urges them to interview five of the people they help, allowing an hour or two for the person to reply at leisure. His supportive and client-oriented approach to change reminds me of Schein's (1969) "process consultation."

Educators should be encouraged to find ways to make learners responsible to themselves. Note that the traditional approach to education includes designing the curriculum (choosing what the students should learn), preparing rigorous syllabi (planning what they should do), and grading (ensuring implementation). In effect, teachers try to make the students responsible to them. Tough's book shows that, as far as we know, this approach has a negligible impact on producing successful changes. (I told you that you would find something with which to disagree!)

Tough suggests that institutions support efforts toward self-education. He asks (p. 93), "How would your boss react to your spending an afternoon in a university library reading in your field of expertise? Would the reaction be different if you spent that afternoon at a university-sponsored workshop in the same field?" Self-learning might provide a much more cost-effective approach to change.

Tough also suggests a direct approach by offering courses in "How to Manage Your Own Changes." Might not such change-oriented courses attract students, he asks? It turns out that I have offered such a course (called Self-Oriented Skill-training) over a three year period in the Wharton MBA program. This elective credit-bearing course typically attracted only .2 percent of the potential students, and it did this only with administrative backing, highly favorable publicity, and massive advertising.

Tough's work offers support to those who are trying to transfer more responsibility to students. It is supportive of such approaches as putting courses on video-tape with the learner controlling the timing and pace. Self-paced learning programs (e.g., teaching machines) can allow more learner responsibility. The provision of "resource banks" would go even further by providing freedom of choice to learners. These could include self-directed learning packages for individuals or groups.

I found this book, as well as his previous book (Tough, 1979), to be inspirational. His work led to an intentional change for me. This was to try a strategy that Tough has been using in teaching his own courses. He grades solely on the basis of the time spent in learning. This removes external evaluation and makes the student responsible for the expenditure of the major educational resource, time. I started to do research on this and have now used it in nine courses since 1978 (Armstrong, 1983). Compared to students in traditional courses, time contract students reported feeling more responsibility for their learning. They also were much more likely to describe specific changes in a critical incidents follow-up survey administered six months after the course ended. Furthermore, I have observed a dramatic difference in the learning atmosphere, compared with that found when I used traditional approaches. The time contract students seemed much more interested in self-change.

Tough's work has attracted much attention in the field of education. It deserves the attention of those in management education and also those who view themselves as change agents.

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