

The Psychology of Personal Constructs

George A. Kelly in **The Psychology of Personal Constructs** makes the point that each individual formulates in his/her own way constructs through which he/her views the world of events. All people, he instructed, are able to create and shape constructs about their own environment. This means that human beings interpret all the physical and social objects in their world to form a pattern. On the basis of this pattern, people make predictions about themselves and use the predictions to guide them in their actions. The robust Kelly proposition is the following: **TO UNDERSTAND INDIVIDUALS ONE MUST UNDERSTAND THEIR PATTERNS.** So, for learning about someone's behavior set one has to understand the way in which they personally construct their world.

A very interesting perspective here is that it is the individual's interpretation of reality, rather than the reality itself, that is important in order to understand behavioral patterns. The model of human nature that Kelly developed from his clinical work with troubled individuals is very different of other theorist in psychology. He believed that people function in the same way that scientists do. They construct theories and hypotheses and then test them against their own form of reality. He stressed that individuals, like scientists, construct their own theories, their own personal constructs or interpretations, by which the are able to predict and exercise some control over the events in their environments.

The way to understand an individual (and even attempt to modify his/her behavioral patterns) is through an examination of his/her personal construct. Of course, this is a unique and very provocative view of human behavior with dramatic implications to the organizational setting...A very complex question with which some of us have being working for four decades is

to what extent organizational culture is the sum of all the personal constructs that coexist at a given period...

Kelly made the strong statement that human beings look at their respective worlds through transparent patterns or templates which they create and then attempt to fit over the realities of which the world is composed. The metaphor that I like to use is that these patterns or templates are sunglasses that provide a particular tint or coloring to everything that the wearer sees. One person's glasses may have a dark tint, another's a rose tint. Each person can look at an identical organizational scene and yet perceive it in a different way, as a function of the tint that frames and biases his/her own view. The same I am saying about having an optimistic or a pessimistic construct. A CONSTRUCT IS A PERSON'S way of looking at the events in his/her world, a way of construing that world.

A pessimist construct is one by which an individual interprets difficulties in his/her opportunities. An optimist construct is one by which an individual establishes opportunities even in her/his difficulties.

To give an example, we can take a student who is in danger of failing a course and is trying to influence the professor to give him/her a passing grade. On the basis of observing the professor for most of the semester, the student concludes that the professor acts in a very authoritarian and superior manner in the classroom and seems to have an inflated of himself and his importance.

From this observation, the student forms the construct that if he/she behaves in a manner that plays up to the professor's exaggerated sense of self-importance so he will respond favorably. The student test the hypothesis against reality. He/she goes to the library and reads a

book the professor has written. Then he/she asks the professor questions about it, and praises the work.

If the professor gives the student a passing grade at the end of the semester, then the hypothesis is confirmed. The construct is a useful one and can be called into play again if the student takes another course with the professor. If the student fails the course, then he/she must construct a new hypothesis for dealing with the professor in a later course or with other professors who seem similar in nature.

Human beings form a large number of constructs but, throughout our lives alternative constructions must always remain available to us. There is nothing absolute or final about any construct, because none can be created that will perfectly predict or anticipate every eventuality. Revision and change to a greater or lesser extent, is always necessary, and the individual must have alternative constructs to turn to.

The challenging argument of George A. Kelly is that we are prisoners neither of biological instincts nor of unconscious influences. We are not pushed and prodded by any such determinants. He invoked none of the usual motivating forces (incentives, needs, drives), not even the concept of motivation! One of his provocative claims was that there is no type of energy force that motivates us. It is not needed because we are already motivated, that is in motion, for the simple reason that we are alive.

Life itself is movement and Kelly saw no need to invoke any other explanation. He shouted that we are delivered fresh into the psychological world alive and struggling.