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One of the most contended and politically hot questions at the centre of people management is the issue of change and development. This is a left–right, sociological–biological, optimist–pessimist debate. It is one that raises much passion, because it touches fundamental values and beliefs, and also because it has wide-ranging implications in business.

On the one side stand the incrementalists: the “can do” people who think that everything is possible. They espouse the optimism of the ideology that everything can change (easily). Progress is possible: most things are possible. They believe in training, mentoring and coaching to improve attitudes, self-perceptions and skills. They are happy with counseling and therapy. In their view, we can all change for the better: learn new skills, and overcome personal problems and drawbacks.

So, they put money into training at work. They feel not only that they can up-skill people, but also change their attitudes and values. People can be taught to be emotionally intelligent, hard-working and honest. We all have talents, we are all creative … and we can be taught how to find, liberate, unblock and reveal those talents. All it takes is the time and the effort … and (of course) the money.

People, on this side of the continuum, consider that we are, to a large extent, products of our surroundings and environment. We are, or are not, enterprising, moral or motivated as a function (almost exclusively) of our situations in life. And this can change. We can “enrich” environments, and therefore enrich people. We can undo that which has been done and re-package people. There is always the possibility of redemption.

They banish the “negative” ideas of accepting what we have “been given” in the lottery of life. Not for them stoicism and acceptance. That is fatalist talk, they say. We can change all aspects of our lives – if we want to. Suffering is optional.

Some people believe we are all (potentially) talented: all-creative, all-intelligent leaders. We just need this talent to be tickled, released, unfettered. There are numerous “case studies” and books in the “slum-dog millionaire” mold that tell the story so well. And so, it is a story we love to
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hear: it is a story of hope. It is a saga of progress, of improvement. It sells well everywhere.

And this line of thinking supports much industry, inside and outside organizations. Consider training and development costs. Of course, you can’t expect someone to be a pilot or a surgeon without considerable training. But don’t they need some very special abilities or gifts in the first place? This is all about personal development and management training. It is about transformation from where we are to a new and better place.

There are differences, of course, in this (rag-tag) group of believers. Some are a little less hopeful than others that we can all change for the good. But there is such a huge change-industry that they support each other for economic reasons.

On the other side of the continuum are people who often like to think of themselves as “hard-headed realists.” They are the entity-theorists: essentialists, if you like the philosophic terminology. These are from the “what you see is what you get” school of life. In their number are stoics, cynics and skeptics.

They are not all tough-minded eugenicists, socio-biologists and geneticists who seem to imply so much behavior is inherited. The Jesuits and the Freudians fall into this camp, at least for people at work. They may have been malleable as young children, but their upbringing has molded, shaped and formed them. Change is difficult: painful, protracted and limited.

So, in the world of work, they argue, it is pretty pointless wasting time and effort on coaching, development and training. It doesn’t work very well. Look around you. That nerdy IT boffin’s emotional intelligence course; that choleric finance manager’s presentation skills course; that histrionic marketing manager’s financial literacy course. Any change there then?

So, the obvious implication is to put your money into better selection. Find the right people in the beginning. Choose right: you can’t change them later. The bride at the wedding dreams “I’ll alter him,” whilst she would be better off believing “aisle, altar, hymn.”

To what extent do people move from one side of this debate to the other? Much common wisdom suggests we might shift our views – the old adage that youths have broad minds and narrow waists, and the middle-aged about the opposite. Equally, there is the line that goes “If you are not a socialist when young, you have no heart; if you are a socialist when old, you have no head.”

Does the bitter pill of disappointment make optimists into pessimists? Knowing people for years, going to school reunions, even contacting them