

# CHANGE IS IN YOUR MIND



**CHANGE**  
By Barry Cassidy

I always try to broaden my horizons. I did not care too much for school when I was young. I also did not do well. Most of my attention was not geared toward academic achievement. Most of the kids in my New Jersey High School were hovering around 97 – 99 percent on whatever that test was that measured our intelligence, while others like me did not score as well.

This week, someone in Iowa came up with the idea of “cognitive privilege,” which points out that smart people have privilege in the United States, and seeks understanding and support for those less cognitively gifted. This was the first I had heard of this kind of privilege, and it made me kind of uneasy — much of my life is helping people who could be described as mostly average.

The advent of the information age has brought a change in the kind of job opportunity offered in the workforce. As people become closer through social media, it seems like everyone is trying to be on equal footing. All you have to do is look at comments sometime under news stories to know that some people use name calling and bullying practices as a substitute for knowledge.

Although people are born with different levels of intellect, it is no real indicator for success. There are very smart people sweeping floors and washing dishes. Look at the illegal immigrants who come to this country. Many of them are escaping persecution or some level of upheaval in their life, and their new life may not include an opportunity to use their intelligence. One could also look at someone who is smart, who took a chance socially or financially, maybe on a spouse or the stock market, that

rendered their intellect moot in the tale of their decline.

I disagree with intelligence premise on a more basic level. I believe that hard work and experience is the key to intellect. No one is immune to the fact that they need to work hard to get ahead. It involves working hard at your craft or profession, and gaining experience from failure or success in your endeavors. The problem is, people do not try, and then make excuses for failure as they compare themselves to others in the marketplace.

They say that 10,000 hours of experience will make you an expert in any given field. The 10,000-hours concept originated in a 1993 paper written by Anders Ericsson, called *The Role of Deliberate Practice in the Acquisition of Expert Performance*. I am not sure if the number is correct, but at a rounded number of 2,000 hours a year (52 weeks of 40 hour weeks), it will take five years of doing something every day to become an expert in that field.

I have been working in public administration for over 45 years, and that relates to about 90,000 hours of experience. I can say that although I am not a big intellect, I know what to do when it comes to revitalizing a downtown. Am I and expert?

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## CHANGE

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Yeah probably, if there is such a thing. The point remains that there are smarter people who are working in revitalization, and they may or may not be an expert, or they may be an expert and cannot translate it to practical terms.

I think that the whole privilege thing is getting out of control. People are making excuses for their inability to succeed in the marketplace, and not accepting personal blame for either not trying hard enough, or maybe being in the wrong place at the wrong time to be competitive in their cohort group. I think the argument for "white privilege" holds less weight now than it did in the 1950s, when there was blatant racism. I think, if anything, there is misguided backlash toward normal white people that do normal things in a normal way. In addition, the cultural appropriation argument further operates as a separating mechanism, which will lead to less opportunity as it acts a race-based reaction view by minorities.

But the cognitive privilege is a little bit different. There is no visible difference between people when it comes to appearance. Cognitive Privilege could be illustrated by someone making a value judgement on a person in job opportunities or admission to a college. I understand that there are college board tests and the like, and maybe those do have sway, but there are a lot of people who do not score well on tests, and get into the college of their choice based upon their presentation.

I think that a more likely reason for what seems to be cognitive privilege is that people's parents have done well and pass on wealth and special access to their children. It is more like the achievement of previous generations, the favors they did for people, the contacts they made and the value they put on identifying the strengths of their children and their encouragement to follow your dreams.

To me... all of these privilege contexts act as an excuse for someone not to try as

hard, and demanding the same decisions on potential opportunities because they are human. Being human is a good thing, and all men are created equal, but all people are not given the same characteristics. Some people are more congenial, some are bigger, smaller or whatever, but it is those characteristics, and not so much that they exist, but more how the characteristics are developed and applied.

I believe that I achieved because my father made me go to college when I wanted to go to Viet Nam and serve my country. When I graduated from college, he found me a good job working in Washington DC. When that job ended, he found me two more jobs over the years that were well paying and important positions. I really did not change much, and I was still the guy in the top 75 percent of my class. Over the years, doing the same thing over and over again made me good at it, but I still am the guy who was in the top 75 percent (means I was in the bottom three-quarters) of my high school class.

When I go back to my high school reunions, I see kids who were much smarter than me, and they settled for less. Was it a lack of drive, a bad divorce or a drug or alcohol problem that caused them to not succeed like you would have thought they would have succeeded? Maybe it is a combination of factors, but maybe it was none of those. Maybe their cognitive advantage did not play out well for them, because they did not have the necessary interpersonal skills to advance.

I contend the more that people try to find reasons for not achieving, the less they will try and the less they will succeed, because they buy in to the excuse that it is someone else and not them making them not achieve.

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