

# Confessions

## OF A BURNED-OUT CHANGE AGENT



*How one woman's workshop experience helped her get her groove back.*

Gayla Zoz, Praesentia, Inc

One day over an onion bagel my friend Jane, who manages a large financial services organization, was listening to me complain about my company's lack of support for the diversity initiatives I lead.

Jane opened her purse, pulled out a compact and flipped it open to face me. "Look here," she said. "Here's why your diversity initiative is stuck."

I saw my reflection in the mirror and smirked. "You must be joking! You of all people should know what it's like to champion a hopeless cause."

She nodded. "I do. But have you considered that you might be part of the problem?"

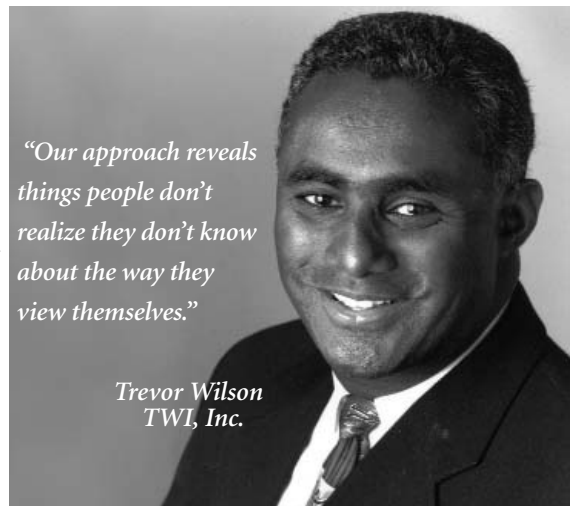
### Could it really be us?

What happens to people like me? How do we get from "point A"—enthusiastic, eager and ready to change the world—to "point B"—feeling hopeless and powerless because people aren't changing fast enough? Is it just burnout? Or is it something more?

I discovered that three toxic beliefs had led me to a place where nothing less than a courageous friend with a make-up mirror could shock me back into effectiveness as a leader of change.

### Toxic Belief #1: Been There, Done That (yawn)

Like many change veterans, I had developed a quiet but pervasive "been there, done that" attitude. Without realizing it, I had closed myself off from new learning. Judy Seidenstein, founder of Piece of Mind Consulting and one of the co-creators of a workshop called *Agents of Change: Transforming Pessimism to Possibility*, believes that new learning keeps change agents fresh by connecting them to the always-expanding body of knowledge and research. The workshop presents an engaging blend of new and



*"Our approach reveals things people don't realize they don't know about the way they view themselves."*

Trevor Wilson  
 TWI, Inc.

familiar experiential activities to help one look at culture change concepts from an unconventional angle, which really helped me see what an insufferable know-it-all I had become.

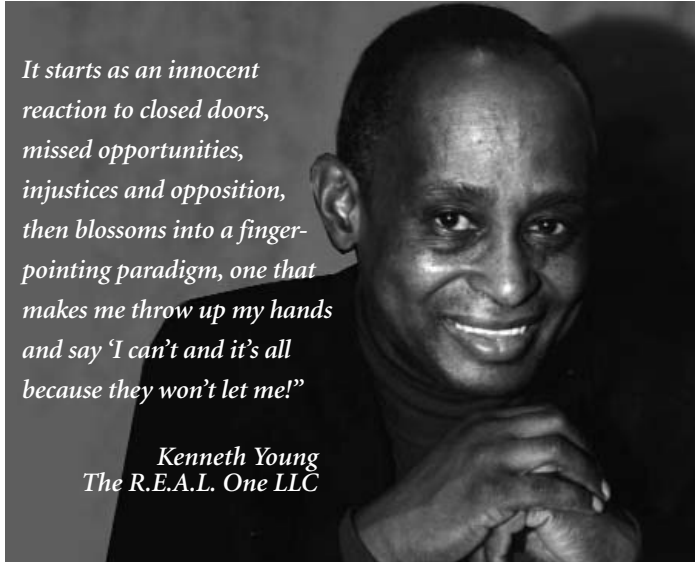
For example, I cringed when I realized during the workshop that I had developed new prejudices that were even more firmly rooted than those released years ago—mostly about the people in my organization who wouldn't change!

**Toxic Belief #2: It's Not Me. It's THEM!**

Much of my career has been spent urging people to take responsibility for their beliefs and biases about others. I've become quite adept at helping people understand how personal paradigms color the way they view others.

When Kenneth Young, one of the workshop's co-creators and co-founder of The R.E.A.L. One LLC, covered this concept, I realized very quickly that he had taken a fork in an otherwise familiar road. Instead of looking at how my personal paradigm affects my ability to view others, I found myself exploring how it colors the way I view myself.

This process of self-examination can be a bit uncomfortable for some, especially culture change veterans like me who are more comfortable shining the spotlight of scrutiny on others. "Our approach reveals things people don't realize they don't know about the way they view themselves," says Trevor Wilson, a co-creator of the workshop who is also author of the book *Diversity at Work: The Business Case for Equity* and founder of TWI, Inc.



*It starts as an innocent reaction to closed doors, missed opportunities, injustices and opposition, then blossoms into a finger-pointing paradigm, one that makes me throw up my hands and say 'I can't and it's all because they won't let me!'*

Kenneth Young  
The R.E.A.L. One LLC



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Judy Seidenstein  
Piece of Mind Consulting

A person's past experiences—the good, the bad and the ugly—fuse with character, values and beliefs to form a paradigm or "come-from." Paradigms filter incoming experience. Incoming data that matches a person's paradigm is acknowledged and used. Data that doesn't ends up discounted or ignored. Positive paradigms provide a clear view of reality which simplifies decision making and problem solving. Negative paradigms, on the other hand, distort incoming data, blinding people to possibility. Change agents who suffer from negative paradigms are often unable to see creative solutions to difficult problems.

Young says that many change agents fail because they don't accept full responsibility for creating change. It was reassuring to learn that this abdication of personal responsibility is rarely

a conscious decision. It starts as an innocent reaction to closed doors, missed opportunities, injustices and opposition, then blossoms into a finger-pointing paradigm, one that makes me throw up my hands and say "I can't and it's all because they won't let me!"

Change agents like me fall into this trap because we are unwilling to confront and own elements of our paradigms that prevent us from taking ownership and making change happen. Used to wearing a happy mask of optimism, I had come to believe that my paradigm was one of hope and possibility when it was really something very different.

As each workshop participant had a turn in the “Come-From” Spotlight, I decided to bare my soul. “I’m the official change agent in a land of lip service. I’m the feel-good department, the organizer of multicultural food day and the maker of bookmarks that say hello in five languages. That’s the diversity program my company expects and that’s what I deliver. Other people need to change and they won’t. I can do things to influence them but when you get right down to it, it won’t matter. We’re talking about a bunch of good-ole-boys who like things just the way they are. There’s nothing I can do to change THAT!”

Who is that whiny, helpless victim, the one blaming everyone else for her own ineffectiveness? Oh (gasp) it’s ME! Look where I was *really* coming from:

- I don’t believe I have any power. I have given it away.
- I rather enjoy being the victim.
- I view the people I work with as *incapable* of change. They could be making progress and I wouldn’t even recognize it.
- I want people to like me and I don’t hold them accountable.

### Toxic Belief #3: Have-Do-Be

Like most people, I was raised to believe that what I have determines what I do, which in turn determines who I am. If I make lots of money, I’ll buy a condo in Florida and then I’ll be happy. Or if I have the right education, I’ll get the right job and then I’ll be successful.

Seidenstein, Wilson and Young believe that there’s another way to look at life, one that supports the efforts of change champions like me and leads to a more authentic way of living. It’s the BE-DO-HAVE approach to life. This way of thinking says who I am determines what I do which, in turn, determines what I have.

How does this concept affect my work as a change agent? I learned that I create change not primarily from *what I do* but from *who I am*. Tools, techniques, trainings and tricks aren’t the key. *Who I Am* is the key or, as the facilitators said, *Who I Be*.

According to Young, translating this knowledge into action starts with a *declaration*—a statement that describes *personal possibilities*. Unlike personal mission statements that describe a future state based on past paradigms, declaration statements create a vision of the future unburdened by the resentments and regrets of the past.

In my case, the powerless victim paradigm is adding the most weight to my luggage. It was time to develop a new, baggage-free “come-from”—defining who I am and what I want to stand for. The workshop’s leaders helped me develop a declaration that is filled with possibility:

*I commit to stop giving up on things  
I believe I can’t change. I stand for  
helping others to bring about change.*

**So what did I learn?**

Why did I lose my effectiveness? I allowed opposition and challenge to corrode my “come-from.” It’s that simple. What good is a change agent who doesn’t truly believe she can bring about change? How can I say I’m leading an effort designed to redistribute power *when I don’t think I have any?*

My boss and I were chatting over onion bagels last week. After listening patiently to his litany of complaints about demanding customers, ungrateful employees and people who just won’t cooperate, I opened my handbag. Throwing my old “come-from” to the wind, I reached for my makeup mirror. Jane had given me an incredible gift. What better way to repay her than to pass it on?

*Developed in collaborative partnership by TWI, Inc., The R.E.A.L. One LLC and Piece of Mind Consulting, Agents of Change: Transforming Pessimism to Possibility is a state-of-the-art educational program using the techniques of personal inquiry to reveal and dismantle barriers to diversity and culture change and dramatically shift perspectives on equity issues for key opinion leaders in any organization. For more information or to register for an upcoming session, contact Jennifer Peters at (416) 368-1968.*

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