

Don't twist yourself out of shape – but do adjust your behaviour!

“Do I really have to twist myself out of shape?”
– I often hear this question in coaching when we work on new behavioural strategies. Behind it usually lies the fear of losing one's authenticity by acting differently. Whether it truly means bending out of shape depends on how we define the term.

Peter Näf

People turn to coaching when their habitual behaviour no longer works in everyday professional life. The aim is to develop new behavioural options.

For example, a leader who has so far succeeded through a conciliatory nature may need to learn to confront issues and address unpleasant topics. The trigger might be a new team member who fails to deliver. Or a long-standing employee who previously had managers that recognised her value without her having to promote herself may suddenly have to make her achievements visible under new superiors – self-marketing becomes essential.

New behaviour feels unnatural

Familiar behaviour runs automatically – countless neural connections ensure short reaction times. New behaviour, on the other hand, requires conscious effort and practice until it becomes second nature.

Learning new behaviour is tiring and can initially feel awkward or even fake – almost as if one were betraying oneself. In truth, it's about becoming more flexible and adapting to the demands of the situation. Like a tree that bends in the wind

and then straightens again, you remain the same at your core. Yet with a broader behavioural repertoire, you'll be able to handle challenges more confidently in future.

Natural and acquired strengths

In my personal and professional assessments, I distinguish between natural and acquired strengths. Natural strengths come easily to us, whereas acquired ones require effort and energy.

If I consistently act against my natural disposition, work becomes exhausting – that would indeed be bending out of shape. For several years, I worked in wealth management. The formal environment and its diplomatic rules clashed with my direct nature. Similarly, I realised early on in auditing that the highly regulated way of working didn't suit me.

The art lies in finding a professional environment that largely matches one's natural temperament – and accepting the remaining demands as manageable adaptations. Many people struggle with this: some expect the organisation to change, while others demand too much flexibility of themselves.

A simple insight helps: people are different. We may know this rationally, yet we still find ourselves surprised or irritated when others – or entire workplaces – operate differently from us (see also my article “Surrounded by Idiots”).

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