

WHO'S GOT CONTROL OF BEHAVIOUR?



The fourth in a series on behaviour change by Grahame Collier investigates the importance of focusing our efforts on behaviours people can change.

It is just not sensible to spend time and money promoting unachievable change and yet that is so often the story for programs intending to shift practice – well intentioned, but doomed to failure from the outset because they fail to appreciate the issue of control.

In my house I do all of the gardening. If you want to create changes in gardening behaviour you have to target me, not my partner. I have 'internal locus of control' over anything to do with planting, watering, mulching, pruning and landscaping.

What do I mean internal locus of control? This is one of those complicated phrases in behaviour change theory that has a really simple meaning – behaviour that I have control over personally, including everything to do with the new grevillea I planted last week.

Behaviour I have no control over is referred to as 'external locus of control'. Irwin Rosenstock's Health Belief Model identifies locus of control as the most important concept that those involved in promoting change must grasp.

Often we forget about it and promote what cannot be changed easily or target people who have no control over the intended behaviour. When targeting people living in multi-unit dwellings we forget any change to the building and its services needs to be approved by the body corporate or the site owner/manager.

In offices people are encouraged to print both sides, but the default position on the printer is single sided and changing it is difficult.

In manufacturing, shop floor staff can often only make changes about operations, with decisions about potentially more far reaching aspects such as procurement made by management.

Even when people do have internal locus of control, Rosenstock says the changed behaviour being promoted must be 'doable', must be seen as 'making a difference' and must be perceived as addressing 'a serious issue or problem'. If the desired change does not meet these three criteria, most people won't make the shift.

Meanwhile, a significant external locus of control issue for all aspects of change is lack of accessible services/materials.

Capacity to take control

Complementing the issue of locus of control

is the concept of 'self-efficacy', described in Albert Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory as "belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute actions required to manage prospective situations".

Hence, self-efficacy is a person's belief in their own ability to carry a desired change to fruition. Bandura describes these beliefs as determinants of how people think, behave and feel.

Therefore, change will only occur when program audiences have a high level of self-efficacy to complement their internal locus of control. If that is not the case, Bandura says you are wasting your time promoting behaviour change actions.

For more sustainable behaviour, this involves belief that what I am doing is ultimately making a difference and that I really can do it and keep doing it.

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FACT FILE: PROS AND CONS OF BEHAVIOUR CONTROL

Important Concepts:	Do – issues and examples	Do – issues and examples
Who has control of behaviour? Only promote behaviours that people see as 'doable' – where they have internal locus of control.	It is getting harder to identify doable changes at home, but examples are: • Four minute showers • Turning appliances off at the plug. Doable behaviours at work include: • A comprehensive recycling and organic waste system • Establishing support for staff who use public transport or ride to work.	Don't promote behaviour where you are doubtful about do-ability. First ask if people are prepared to make the shift: • Don't push e-waste recycling if services are not easily accessible • Check out the public transport. Ensure you are using really evidence: • People say they are 'willing to pay more' in a survey, but are they really?
Only promote behaviours people see as really making a difference.	Check out how important people consider the underlying is before you address it. Sometimes they need to be convinced: • Turning off computers at the plug - what difference does it make really?	Often people won't change a behaviour because they think it is trivial: • Collecting shower wastewater • Collecting food scraps at work for a worm farm.
Ensure you promote behaviours where your intended audience has self-belief about their capacity to make the change.	People find it easier to change where they feel happy with the result: • Adjusting the water heater in winter is an easier change than installing a low flow shower head. Incentives often work because people feel good about the change: • Free low flow shower head programs make it more palatable.	Often behavior that requires an understanding of technology is resisted: • While people think smart meters are good idea, they can be reluctant to use them.