

WHEN'S ENOUGH ENOUGH? UNDERSTANDING NORMS

The last in a series from Grahame Collier looks at the 'Holy Grail' of behaviour change programs - to cement the desired action as a norm or the 'thing to do'.

Sustaining behaviour change is achieved through peer-based reinforcement and the provision of infrastructure and systems, rather than in-depth and continuing motivation/incentive or education programs. Well, that is the theory anyway.

This proposition contains some challenging and complex concepts that need to be unpacked and, more importantly, integrated into the work of people attempting to motivate change.

First of all, what is a 'norm'? Essentially it is the rule(s) a group or community uses to form appropriate beliefs, attitudes and behaviours, and to frame interactions with others and with their world. Community norms are rules that define the behaviour that is expected, required or acceptable in particular circumstances.

For some readers the word 'rules' will grate. It is important to understand it really tries to summarise that norms are, in a sense, the agreed expectations by which a community guides/shapes the behaviour of its members in a given situation.

Perhaps the word 'community' requires some discussion too. It might mean all those in a particular location or cultural group, for some norms it might relate to social class or gender or even socio-economic status. Work groups are also communities and have their own norms.

In terms of environmental sustainability, let me provide two examples of behaviour that can be regarded as normative in Australia, albeit with variation from community to community and group to group.

At home the norms include regular engagement with kerbside recycling, turning off any lights not in use, not putting cooking oils down the sink, limiting water use and cleaning up dog droppings. These are all behaviour changes that have been made relatively recently and are sustained by community support.

At work the norms clearly relate to the type of activity. In offices they include behaviours such as last one out turns off the lights, turning off computers at the end of the day, and only smoking outside. In retail the norms include recycling of fats, oils, cardboards and the like. In manufacturing, sustainability norms may relate to using sustainable materials and minimising waste in the production process.



One kind of Norm: the well-loved couch potato who starred in the 'Life. Be in it' television community service campaigns.

But when is a norm a norm?

Good question – and the answer is not clear in the research. Obviously though, the establishment of a behaviour as a norm relates to the number/percentage of the community who are undertaking the specific practice. A particular action is a norm when it becomes an unconscious pattern of behaviour, often cued by recurring stimuli in a stable context.

Does this mean a behaviour is a norm when 10 per cent of a community is doing it, or does it need 75 per cent of people?

The literature is a little unclear; it would help if it was clearer and we had a substantive/quantitative measure.

But because a norm is an abstract concept rather than a numerical certainty, the actual percentage is arguable. Clearly a norm requires more than 25 per cent of a community to undertake an action, but how much more? I don't know, but a 75 per cent take up may be closer to the mark.

This is all very well, but how do I motivate desired behaviours so they become norms? In 'establishing' a norm the program planner is attempting to create a situation whereby people are self-reflecting and making change as appropriate.

Change requires personal reflection, including skills in self-auditing of behaviour against a set of agreed criteria



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(these might be social norms in the community or mandated sustainability requirements in business) and the commitment to doing the personal/organisational review and selecting the most appropriate changes for place, time and context.

It also means a commitment to continually revising social/organisational norms and to achieving a more sustainable society.

The power of community

We can't really make something a norm, however. It is really an outcome of what happens when programs aimed at behaviour change are successful. The previous four articles in this series provided a range of advice about how to make them successful. For example: "It could be argued cleaning up dog poo is now a socially appropriate behaviour that has become a norm amongst dog owners because of the programs that have been delivered."

Being 'like the Joneses' is still a driver to our behaviour, especially for major goods such as cars and houses. For program planners, this issue is important because, while most interventions will be directed at individuals, the establishment of sustainability norms is an important part of promoting more responsible consumption. For example, if we could move the community towards a norm of owning cars with a 2.5 litre capacity or less, the impact on the environment would be substantial.

What if we have been successful and most people are behaving in a particular and sustainable way? Does this mean you can forget it? Absolutely not. Even norms require attention and reinforcement. The kerbside recycling system, while clearly a norm, is constantly reinforced by councils through information to residents about what can and cannot be recycled.

Ongoing compliance with the norm is vital and it is important that:

- If you think a specific behaviour is a norm within your community, you continue to nurture it and build on it;
- You understand that norms can be fragile things and need reinforcement.

For example, in the early and middle parts of the 20th century, composting and running chickens at home was a norm. Both fell out of favour and have begun to revive only in the last 20 years or so;

- You use people engaged in normative behaviour as advocates for that behaviour, for late adopters. Often people will listen to others in their community; and
- You appreciate that a behaviour is a norm when a substantial number of

the community undertake that behaviour – you don't need everyone doing it.

Grahame Collier is principal of T Issues Consultancy (www.tissues.com.au). Find the others in the series at www.wme.com.au >Sustainability > Society.



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– Grahame Collie, T Issues Consultancy

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