

REWIRING FOR BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

Bringing about real behaviour change can be difficult, frustrating and time-consuming. Grahame Collier looks at the theory behind motivating behaviour shifts.

Are you in the business of trying to motivate change in the behaviour or practices of other people or organisations? If you are and you sometimes wonder 'Am I actually achieving anything here?' then you're not alone. All of us working to shift behaviour sometimes doubt our capacity to make a difference.

Yet making a difference is critical when we're living within finite resources on a planet threatened by climate change, resource depletion and population growth.

First of all though is the question of whether a change in behaviour can be externally motivated? The short answer is a resounding yes.

If it wasn't possible, we would have a national road toll more than double our 2010 rate. Federal figures show the national road toll in 1970 was 3,798 (or eight deaths per 10,000 registered vehicles); in 2010 it was 1,368 (or less than one per 10,000 registered vehicles).

If it wasn't possible, we would be using more water, not less. Sydney Water statistics show Greater Sydney is using the same amount of water now as in 1974, even though the city's population has

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grown by at least one million people.

If it wasn't possible, landfill sites around our major cities would be exhausted and resource recovery would not be a norm. Yet most Australians (84 per cent) sort recyclable from non-recyclable waste materials all, or most, of the time.

It is relatively easy to find examples of individual and organisational change motivated externally by shifts in public or company policy and prompted through a range of planned interventions. Examples are seen in health, safety, social justice and sustainability.

Sometimes though, as we work away at our own programs, we forget the successful change programs that have been delivered. Clearly, the corporate sector thinks change

can be externally motivated – otherwise our screens, streets, airwaves, newspapers and internet would not be full of advertising and an entire major business sector would not exist.

So the really important questions about change are not, 'Is it possible to motivate it?' but 'How do I motivate change through my work?' and 'Is what I am doing any good?'

Answering these questions is the province of a large body of academic work on social change and behaviour change theory. Understanding has also been achieved through practice – trial and error. Without getting too deeply into the theory, some basic concepts might help you plan programs so they are more effective for behaviour change.

The traditional motivators of change include legislation and enforcement, a range of financial and other incentives/disincentives, improved infrastructure and education and training programs. The most successful changes are motivated by strategic combinations of these.

For example, the reduction in the road toll has been achieved through a combination of increased offences and penalties (more and larger fines), disincentives (the driver points system), improved infrastructure (better roads, seat belts in all vehicles) and education and training (improved driver training and significant education about slower driving and using seat belts all the time).

Knowing, valuing and doing

In reality, any single motivator is unlikely to achieve the desired effect at a sufficiently high level to warrant the effort, yet all too often our change programs simply

FACT FILE: WHAT MIGHT WORK FOR YOUR PROGRAMS?

- Use a combination of different motivators. For example, educate people about the law and the risks if caught.
- Use the language of your target group to communicate clearly the changes you are seeking.
- For example, conduct a reading age test on your draft material.
- Capture people's interest and spark them to do something – the intent is not just knowing, but doing. Ask a trusted peer to review your program.
- Seek commitment from people to 'have a go'. Expect a shift.
- Show people what to do rather than just telling them to do it.
- Demonstrate the benefits of the change you are seeking. Show 'what's in it for them'.
- Use half the number of words you thought you needed and tell people what others are doing on the same subject.
- Find really good tag lines related to behaviour, such as the NSW Government's 'Don't be a Tosser' litter program and the South East Queensland water reduction program 'Target 140'.

SIX RISK FACTORS THAT AFFECT CHANGE

Tim Cotter explains the six risk factors that have the potential to derail efforts to promote change.

Those frustrated with the pace of the global response to climate change could conclude we are either underestimating the risk of inaction or overestimating the risk of taking action. Either way, how we perceive risk is an interesting field of research.

While at a rational, economic level, risk is analysed in terms of the probability and severity of negative consequences, humans tend to consider a much wider array of factors. Asking people to change their behaviour is likely to have them thinking of a number of possible risk factors. One model identifies six types of risk:

- Functional risk – Will the change actually work? For instance, will public transport get me where I need to go?
- Physical risk – Will I be safe? Is it safe on the trains?
- Financial risk – What are the costs and benefits? Will I save money by taking public transport?
- Social risk – Will my reputation suffer? Isn't it uncool to ride the bus?
- Psychological risk – Will I feel good about it? Aren't I more comfortable in the car, away from all those people?
- Time risk – Will it take longer? Is the system reliable enough to get me to work on time?

While we seldom work through these things in an explicit manner, each has the potential to derail efforts to promote change.

Probably the most important aspect of risk perception as it relates to climate change is the interplay between analysis and emotion. Not only do we consider the probability and severity of outcomes when we approach a risk situation, we also act based on how we feel about it, probably more than we would imagine.

This goes a long way to explaining the reluctance of many people to change their behaviour in response to the threats posed by climate change. Many of the changes are seen as requiring a sacrifice of immediate benefits in favour of more long-term, distant goals.

When it comes to taking a big picture view, it seems we are also driven more by our current climate experience than an imagined future. For most people, climate change is not having an obvious effect on our daily lives and this lack of negative emotional experience appears to be driving our actions more than the dire future consequences being projected by scientists.

The challenge for promoters of environmentally responsible action, therefore, is to somehow demonstrate more effectively the risk of unsustainable behaviours, and reduce the perceived risk of more sustainable behaviours.

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give people information and expect them to change their behaviour. For example, tell them about the subsidy on water tanks and we expect them to buy a tank; inform them about an e-waste recycling drop-off point and we expect them to use it.

Clearly, there is some relationship between knowing and doing, but it is not straightforward or absolute. Just because someone knows something does not mean that they do it. Smokers know smoking is a health hazard; litterers know littering is against the law; businesses that pollute water know about the negative impacts on the environment and potentially their bottom line.

Knowing is important but won't neces-

sarily lead to change. If people don't know then they are less likely to change, but the converse does not always apply. When a shift does not happen, giving more and more information is not the answer. Often we generate lots of big words because 'we want people to know'. In reality, these words just get in the way.

Even positive values towards an issue do not lead directly to change. People value water, but not everyone has a water tank at home. They value power produced by natural means, but don't buy greenpower. They value natural beauty, but still litter in national parks. And they value their health, but exercise too little and smoke and drink too much.

The gap between knowing/valuing and doing is large and the relationship will always remain indirect for some of the people, some of the time. Despite this, interventions must still work at enhancing knowing and valuing alongside the more direct motivators of rules, rewards and infrastructure. Without it, we risk missing a key piece of the sustainability puzzle and doubts will continue to plague those of us seeking to drive behaviour change.

This is the first in a bi-monthly series about behaviour shift and how to motivate it. The June issue will focus on readying people for change. Grahame Collier is principle of T Issues Consultancy (www.tissues.com.au) **WME**

