OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO BEHAVIOR CHANGE

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Does this sound familiar? You are asked to lead a change program. Perhaps you are a member of the team, a manager, an HR professional, or an external training partner (what, for simplicity’s sake, we will refer to as a “change agent” in this issue of TD at Work). You’ve discovered a great training tool or model that fits the organization’s needs perfectly, and you have a vested interest in the program’s delivery and subsequent success.

Initial impressions are that the program has been a huge success. The participants gain insights, know what changes need to take place, and have practiced the associated new skills and behavior. Three months later during the evaluation, you realize the learning was never really transferred to the job. Change didn’t take place as quickly or as thoroughly as desired or expected. So, you’re facing a big disappointment and maybe a major waste of time, energy, and money.

Effective learning and development models, and the concepts behind them, can only be successfully taken onboard if we understand human behavior. Cognitive behavior psychology shows us that even people who genuinely want to change find it difficult. As Simon Sinek explains in Leaders Eat Last, brain science confirms that people need to feel involved in driving the change, rather than being threatened by it.

Our C Step program—which has origins in Parenting With Love and Limits, an evidence-based treatment model for families, focuses on people, not just learning plans.

In this TD at Work you will learn:

• why behavior change doesn’t always happen
• the three major blockers preventing change
• steps you can take to ensure the best chance of success with changing behavior.

EVEN THOUGH INDIVIDUALS WANT TO CHANGE, THEY FIND IT HARD TO DO SO AND DON’T UNDERSTAND WHY.

WHY CAN’T WE CHANGE?

We have seen in our work that, when planning change, many organizations focus on the plan and not the people. The psychological aspects of change are not addressed, decisions are made in the boardroom and not on the work floor, and there is a noticeable lack of follow-up and feedback. All of which means that, even though individuals want to change, they find it hard to do so and don’t understand why.

Often, change plans are too complex and inconsistent. Effort and money is invested in new systems and initiatives that don’t succeed. Employees are trained in new techniques and expected to adopt the behaviors needed for an organizational change. But the human factor is not taken into account. We tend to be too optimistic and assume that if participants seem to be willing and able to change, they will.

The reality is that we don’t always do the things we want to do. We all know we shouldn’t wait until the last minute to finish a project, just as we all know we should visit our aging aunt, go to the gym, or organize our office. We know we should do these things. However, it is just not feasible for a human being to fulfill all of these social demands and requirements. We are not robots.

The good news is that the neuroplasticity of the human brain allows for change. The bad news is that our brain prefers homeostasis and longs for what it knows best. Many of your employees are already sufficiently self-aware to know where their opportunities for improvement lie and which pitfalls to avoid. But too often, training sessions are focused on the superficial aspects of behavior change.

In addition, there is little attention given to understanding the existing behavior and how employees have benefited from it. People do not understand why they are there. This understanding is necessary before starting to change anything.

In the past decade, there has been a substantial amount of research about behavior change. People have the tendency to hold on to their attitudes, traits, and behaviors even when (or especially when) their managers try to convince them otherwise. For many people, change brings
feelings of uncertainty, stress, and a lack of control (Stoffer 2002; Weeks, Roberts, Chonko, and Jones 2004). This means that the prefrontal cortex of their brain underperforms, and they fall back on earlier behavioral patterns and habits (Duhigg 2012).

Awareness of common change blockers and how to deal with them will help you make change happen more efficiently and with longer-lasting results.

**Resistance to Change**

Change blockers are the part of us that make us resist change and limit our abilities to embrace it. They are emotional strategies that we’ve developed over time to avoid pain and discomfort. The result of these blockers is that we often won’t or can’t take on sufficient responsibility to develop ourselves (or members of our team).

These patterns may involve both fear of change in general and fear of specific negative consequences that a certain kind of change can...
bring. They are collective behavior responses that we all can identify with.

John P. Kotter and Leonard A. Schlesinger (2008) explain that people typically have a distaste for change if they:

• are afraid they will lose something of value
• believe the proposed change has disadvantages or will require too much effort
• are resigned to the current situation.

Let’s use the example of John, whose manager is a client of ours. His company is implementing a change program. John is not very enthusiastic about what is expected of him. Those leading the change may interpret this as “John doesn’t seem very involved and therefore needs more information.” But that isn’t necessarily the case. John’s change blockers just need a little attention. We need to focus on them, rather than getting frustrated by John’s apparent lack of interest.

Three Primary Change Blockers
Once you are aware of possible pitfalls, you can think two steps ahead to predict and prepare for the strategies people will come up with to sabotage change. You can then create plans to overcome them. See the Job Aid, Thinking Two Steps Ahead, for details.

Noni Höfner, a German provocative psychologist, meaning a psychologist whose approach involves playing the devil’s advocate, writes that people usually don’t want to change their behavior because they find it too risky, too much effort, or too far from their personality. These three barriers can be identified as fear, laziness, or resignation.

These very human pitfalls are ideas that may indicate a fixed mindset as defined by Carol Dweck (2006). People inhibited by these barriers cannot develop their talent to the fullest. In addition, they find it hard to take the step to change.

Change Blockers in Action
Many of our clients wish there were more room for feedback in their organization. They feel that this would be much more positive than a culture where people are hearing information through the proverbial grapevine.

In reality, it’s difficult to turn a culture of talking about someone into one of talking with someone, especially about sensitive behavioral concepts. People don’t want to stick their necks out and tell a colleague what they really think. Never mind giving feedback to their boss. People may have had experiences that lead them to believe it’s better to say nothing. And sometimes they are absolutely right!

**WHY WE CHANGE**

Behavior change will occur if:

• a common goal is established
• the desired behavior is mutually agreed upon
• monitoring is organized and executed by all team members
• contracts that state consequences are created
• all those involved accept the human behaviors that get in the way
• those who need extra help receive it
• people are given opportunities to exercise the new behavior
• experiences about successes and failures are shared.