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The Three Phases of Behavior Change

Most of us have been involved in an effort to change someone's behavior at one time or another during our careers. Maybe a boss, coworker or mentor was trying to change something about your behavior. Or, perhaps you were trying to change someone else's behavior. Research indicates that an estimated 70% of all efforts to change behavior in the workplace fail. If these statistics are correct there's a good chance that the behavior modification efforts you've been involved in have either been less successful that you had hoped or ended in outright failure. So what went wrong?

Before we start dissecting the process let's take a look at a typical effort to change someone's behavior. We'll use Jim, a talented, upcoming and well respected middle manager as our guinea pig. Jim's manager has high hopes for him and has been pushing him hard to be more vocal in meetings. He feels Jim has good ideas and needs to be much more assertive about expressing his views, particularly in the presence of leaders more senior in the organization than he. Jim's boss has had several conversations with him on this topic but not much has happened. He's even arranged for Jim to attend meetings with senior leaders so he'll have opportunities to speak up. However, about the only thing that's come from the meetings is Jim's admission that "I know, I need to do that". Jim's boss is getting impatient and decides the time has come to take action, so he sits Jim down and tells him in no uncertain terms what he expects him to do. The result? Sixty days pass, Jim has made a few feeble attempts to interject his opinions which weren't all that well received, so he has completely given up trying, and his boss is even more frustrated.

Sound familiar? The above process (and result) is repeated hundreds of times every week at businesses all across America. Actually disappointing results aren't surprising – in fact, they're very predictable. The simple reason is that getting someone to successfully change (or more correctly, manage) behavior involves following a step-by-step process. And, if one of the steps is taken out of sequence or skipped entirely, disappointing results or outright failure are almost guaranteed. Let's take a look at the steps…

1. Recognition

Until a person realizes their behavior is getting in their way either personally or professionally they are unlikely to change. So the first step in behavior change is recognition – does the person recognize they have a behavior that they need to change? The classic mistake that many leaders make when working with an employee to change a behavior, no matter if the behavior in question is a developmental opportunity like speaking up in meetings or a performance issue such as coming in late, is to start by telling the person they have a problem. As you might imagine, this approach is often met with surprise and confusion and may even trigger a defensive response.

Let's face it – people don't like to be told things about themselves that they perceive as negatives, even if the person doing the telling has their best interests at heart. So how do we get people to recognize a behavioral issue without coming right out and telling them "they have a problem?" There are two relatively simple answers. The first is to ask questions designed to help people become more aware of behaviors; questions like "how comfortable are you speaking up at meetings"? or "how would you rate your effectiveness at getting your ideas across in meetings"? The other technique is to administer some type of behavioral assessment and then go through it with the person whose behavior you're trying to change. That way, you've removed yourself from the role of "telling" and are simply helping the person understand the assessment. Chances are if you use a reputable, well established assessment tool the behavior issue you're trying to correct, or the behavioral characteristics driving the behavior will be obvious to both you and the person taking the assessment.

2. Commitment

The next step is commitment. Someone can recognize the need to change but until they make a personal commitment to do what is necessary to change, simply recognizing that a behavior is inappropriate or even destructive (smoking, for example), is not enough motivation to change. Getting commitment boils down to "WIIFM" – "what's in it for me"? The person has to recognize some positive benefit for making the change (or some negative consequence for not making the change). The most common mistake we make during this phase (if we even get to this phase) is assuming that logic will motivate someone to change.

Logic is a great tool to help people understand something but rarely is logic an effective change agent. People are motivated to change by emotions, not logic. So the key to getting commitment is to appeal to someone's emotions, but again, we have to resist the temptation to "tell" someone what's in it for them. Once more questions come to the rescue. Questions like "if you were to change (or manage) this behavior how do you see that impacting your career?" will usually result in commitment once the person realizes for themselves the benefits of change.

3. Action Plan

Step three is the action plan for change – what are you going to do to change (or manage) your behavior? Believe it or not this step is easy compared to the first two. Once someone has recognized the need for behavior change and made a personal commitment to do so what to do to accomplish the change it pretty straight forward. And, this is where a coach's input can be very useful. Helping a person who is ready to change define success, develop action steps and monitor progress are all key activities for the coach (notice I say "help" them, not 'tell' them). Generally speaking the action steps will fall into three phases; 1.) initial steps to get the ball rolling, 2.) practicing/reinforcing the new behavior, and 3.) steps to take if a "relapse" occurs.

Summary

Let's go back to our "typical" effort to change behavior for a minute and review why this approach is so ineffective. As discussed the approach is often to "tell" someone they have a behavior issue and then "tell" them how you expect them to change. Sometimes the manager will even "tell" them what the action plan should be. No wonder the person's reaction is often somewhere between a blank stare and defensive (I like to say "it's like showing a watch to a pig"). In many cases they don't even realize they have a behavioral issue, much less feel any need to change. Remember, behavior change is a process. If you skip a step or try to take the steps out of order (going right to step three – how to change), behavior change isn't likely to occur.

Questions for the Author?
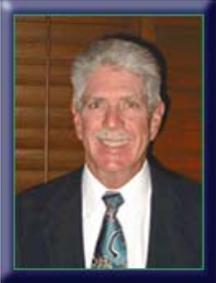
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