

Inspiring Change Through Behavioral Science



Inspiring Change

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This paper is about how to use the science of behavior in business, to manage safety behavior, or really any kind of behavior that is important to you or your organization. Behavioral science has a lot to say about how we should conduct ourselves in business. It seems that business models and models of management and motivation are becoming increasingly complex, to the point of overwhelming leaders with too much theory. My position is that when it comes to theory, more is not always better. Therefore, I suggest that until you really have mastered the fundamentals of behavioral science, you should keep it as simple as possible. This presentation is aimed at taking complex theory and helping you to put it into simple practices that can change your day-to-day life, almost as soon as you begin to use them. At its most basic level, the science of behavior suggests that fundamentals are really what matters most in business. Get the simple things right, and then life becomes much easier.

Fundamentals From a High Level

Some questions for you to consider:

- Do you have the right strategy for achieving your goals?
- Do you have the most effective and efficient processes in place for executing your strategies?
- Are you getting the right behavior for executing your key processes and strategy?

Most business schools and organizational training systems do very well in covering the first two topics (strategy and process), but very few truly understand behavior. Deming (and subsequently, Total Quality Management) treated behavior as 'noise' that was a virtually uncontrollable variable; correcting the process was the only real way to achieve change from his viewpoint. For the most part, this view has carried over into the application of modern techniques such as Six-Sigma and Lean.

These views are common because few know the techniques of behavior change. And, until you know these secrets, behavior appears to be nothing more than 'noise' that negatively affects your processes from time to time.

For this reason, behavior is the differentiator that sets you apart from your competitors. Behavior is the multiplier that controls just how well your strategy and process work; whether the strategy and processes are applied at all, or if people choose to do something different entirely when no one is watching.

Note:

This paper is an excerpt from Dr. Austin's forthcoming book. To learn more about behavioral science, please send us an [email](#) for free resources.

Business runs on consistency. The most effective organizations, leaders, managers, and employees are those who do the right things, over and over again. I realize that this may not be the sexiest view of performance – in fact it is rather boring. Despite the fact that we routinely see large-scale complex initiatives driven by executives, it really is the basics that make the difference in the world of business.

In the day-to-day lives of employees, it is the consistency of simple things that mean a lot. Can you expect a regular paycheck? Do you know how your boss will react when he hears good news? How about bad news? Do you know what to expect at meetings? Do they start on time? Do they end on time? Do people do what they promised to do at the last meeting? These are all things that my colleagues and me have encouraged leaders to start to look at and measure, because if these things are not firmly in place, you just can't execute as well on more complex things.

In our consulting work, my colleagues and I in the BMT Federation (www.bmtfed.com) have gathered some great examples of some simple things that leaders do to make a difference.

- Upon her first week of starting at a new job, one top leader decided to allow her staff to remove the walls to her office. As her office was situated next to the other directors on the job, and they still had their walls, she did not make friends among the management by doing this. However, since none of her team had walls in their cubicles, her team loved her for it. She described this practice as trying to equalize things between her and her staff, rather than trying to manage through fear and intimidation. She earned big respect from her staff in her first week on the job by trying something new.
- Another top leader of a construction firm regularly visits work sites, dressed in the same way as the workers on the site are dressed. His hard hat is the same, his uniform the same, boots the same, etc., and his visits are often unannounced – no fanfare to remind people that the top boss is visiting. He does this and other things so that he is forced to earn the respect of his work force through his actions and not by commanding it through his formal power in the organization. His view is that earned respect is much more powerful.
- A leadership team developed a white board to solicit employee ideas. Not a virtual one, but a real white-board with dry-erase markers. People were encouraged to write anything on it they wanted, and all sorts of things showed up on the board. Now, the interesting thing was not the board; suggestion boxes have been gathering dust for years in most companies. The thing that made this idea work was that the leadership of the site manager. He started by asking personally for people to anonymously write their questions on the board, so that he could respond to them – and then he did, every week. With great regularity, he addressed the workforce and seriously responded to every question on the board, even if the questions were "not so serious."

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Things Leaders do to Make a Difference

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Over time, people stopped writing nonsense on the board in favor of serious inquiries, and employees received the feedback straight from the site manager that they were looking for. The company got so many good questions on the board each week that they are now starting a 'virtual white board' for management.

These examples may seem simple, but in each case the leader required the courage necessary to do something out of the ordinary. In each example, seemingly small changes in the behavior of the leader had enormous and lasting impact on the job, other managers, and workers. This is where the science begins: Behavior change starts with you.

The examples given above are simple. However, don't be fooled into thinking that making a one-time change will have a lasting impact on your team. The leaders in the examples above were constantly taking chances, they were trying lots of things (some of which worked, and some that did not) and constantly challenging themselves to do better – to truly lead by example.

You Can't Buy Behavior

Thus, behavioral science is not a one-time fix. You cannot purchase a behavioral science solution as if it were a computer program. Those who sell you such a solution are leading you down a path that you will soon find littered with failures of others who also sought the easy way out.

In this case, there is no easy way out – you must learn behavior to reap its rewards, and this requires practice, coaching, and continuous improvement at the very least. This is made easier if you have a small group of like-minded people to work together on applications. It's a difficult path to take, but those who do it successfully clearly outperform their competitors. There are nearly 40 years of scientific research data to support this claim.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

~ Margaret Mead

What Causes Behavior?

Behavioral science has taught us that there are three factors that cause most day-to-day behavior:

1. *Genetics and biology.* The science clearly shows that your biology determines your behavior to some extent. The problem here is that knowing that biology affects behavior does not really

help us to manage better. Unfortunately, we're generally powerless when it comes to our genetics and biology; even the most advanced science has led to very few treatments or cures for diseases since the human genome was mapped about 10 years ago.

2. *Your life's history.* Anything and everything that you have been exposed to since you were born could conceivably have an impact on how you behave at any given moment. In each decision we make, whether conscious of it or not, we bring to bear all of our past experiences on the current situation. One of the most lucrative areas for many management-consulting firms is in personality testing; this is typically an attempt to predict future behavior by asking you a series of questions and categorizing your responses. The problem is that most tests are extremely poor predictors of future behavior. The Myers-Briggs Personality Inventory (MBTI) is one of the most widely used tests of this nature. Worldwide, business spends probably billions of dollars annually on these tests. Unfortunately for the organizations, the research suggests little or no link from the test results to organizational results or job performance. Still, the allure of a test that can predict behavior is too strong for many people to avoid. From my perspective, however, money spent on these tests in hopes of performance improvements is simply wasting your valuable resources.

Therefore, this cause has not proved very useful to leaders and managers, so we must look to the 3rd cause for our salvation.

3. *Environment.* The 3rd cause of behavior is the environment. By this, I mean your immediate environment: the things that happen around you at the very moment are the things that often have the biggest impact on how you behave. There are obvious examples: You act differently when visiting your mother than when you attend a sporting event of your favorite team or when you are at a bar or nightclub. You say different things to your friends than to your children.

Most of us have been to meetings where someone continually answers calls or responds to emails while others are talking. You know just how disruptive this can be. You also know how rare it is that someone says something about it to the person who is being disruptive. I suggest that the main thing that is keeping us from saying anything is the fear of how the recipient of your feedback will react. That uncertainty is enough to keep us from having the conversation at all. This goes for everyone in the organization, from the workers to top managers – no one is exempt from this disabling fear. However, one way to get past it is to see the success that feedback can have when it is used effectively.

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What Causes Behavior?

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As you learn more about behavioral science, you will find that the one thing you have control over is the environment in which behavior occurs. You can say or do something different in order to create an environment in which the behavior you want to see is more likely to occur. That's the foundation of behavioral science – changes to the environment produce changes in behavior. Once you realize this, you can start to experiment. What you'll find is that if someone's behavior produces a change in the environment that she sees as positive, then her behavior will continue. If his behavior causes a change in the environment that he sees as negative, then his behavior is less likely to continue.

*“Every little bit helps you
to do something different
in your day-to-day life.”*

In Conclusion

This paper is meant to serve as a basic introduction to behavior. Around the world, Behavioral Science is offered as a degree subject – you can earn a masters or doctoral degree in it, and the latter can take 5 to 7 years of full time study to achieve, even after an undergraduate degree. This means that you have much to learn, but hopefully this paper has piqued your interest enough so that you seek more information: Every little bit helps you to do something different in your day-to-day life.

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