



Kicking Old Habits

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AWA WORKING TO TRANSFORM BUSINESS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The journey to agile behaviour

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Why does behavioural change have to be so difficult?

Over the last 6 years, we've given a huge amount of thought to the subject having worked on behavioural change programmes involving over 22,000 people in some of the UK's most respected organisations.

The sort of change we are talking about is where people change their daily working practices, working some of their time at home or satellite offices; where they work in the office in a mobile fashion unleashed from working at the same desk every day. The sort of change that means people have to learn to use social media tools to form communities of interest across their organisations tapping in to the many thousands of years of combined knowledge in their work community. In other words, changes in working practices facilitated by technology that improve personal and corporate outcomes.

But why don't people want to change?

In fact some people do want to change. In our experience, about 10%-15% of people want change almost regardless of what the change is. You can probably think about people in your own organisation that are like this. A further 10%-15% don't want change under any circumstances, but the vast majority will give the change a chance if they have been engaged properly and have an opportunity to 'make sense' of the change.

As an individual, your interest in the change is likely to depend on what you think you'll gain or what you think you'll lose from the change, along with the degree to which you are emotionally wedded to the status quo.

But suffice to say that if the change requires a significant shift in behaviour (which most significant changes do these days), then imposition by an immature or autocratic management regime, will lead to the change being short lived or even rejected.



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Grooving

But why is behavioural change so difficult? I've concluded that it's all about unlearning 'grooved' behaviours and re-learning new ones and having the motivation to do this. To explain, let me take you back to when I was about 25. I was a reasonably useful tennis player and in my spare time obtained a coaching qualification and coached budding tennis players of all ages.

To teach a player a new shot you need to show the player how to hit a shot, letting the player see you hit (model) the shot from all angles, let them try it, let them ask questions, provide them with feedback and so on. Then you have to get the player to repeat the same movements thousands of times. At this point the shot is performed subconsciously. In other words the player doesn't even have to think about it. This is called 'grooving'. The shot is grooved and grooved until it is perfect and subconscious. The player is then able to focus on using the shot in battle as opposed to thinking consciously about producing the shot.

The same is true when you learn to drive. To start with, all the actions, changing gear, using the clutch, accelerating are all awkward conscious acts, but as you drive more and more they become engrained in your subconscious and you don't even think of them consciously.

Through the 'learning' process the neurons in your brain become connected together to form permanent channels, to 'bake in' the sequence of instructions and movements that go to creating the actions needed to perform the activities you have learned.

In the office groove

Now let's look at people coming to the office day after day after day for say 10 years. Something very similar happens. People will tend to follow the same patterns of movement and behaviour over and over. They come to the same desk, see the same people, use the same equipment, eat lunch in the same place, know how they relate in the pecking order and so on. They perform the same acts over and over again.

There isn't a coach, so people simply learn the patterns, the norms, the rituals and behaviours that seem to be 'accepted' from their peers in the community to which they

are (or aspire) to be part. These patterns become engrained in their brains in the same way that the actions and movements needed to produce a great backhand do. So over time people become 'grooved' and the grooving is reinforced by peer groups and behavioural norms in the work community, and this is as true for the senior leaders as it is for the operational staff. And deeply engrained habits get pretty close to being addictions. Are people addicted to working in traditional ways, to the status quo?

The process of transition to new behaviours

So how do we manage the transition to new behavioural norms in the face of these embedded habits? Returning to my tennis example, if the player needs to change the technique in his backhand, the coach has to work to re-construct and re-groove the shot. It's tough, because the old technique is so well grooved that transitioning to the new shot takes courage, particularly in the early stages. It's easy in a match situation for the player to revert to playing the old shot under the pressure of competition. It feels more comfortable, safe and less risky.

To achieve a lasting change in technique the coach first needs to get the player to recognise the need for change, not always easy. If the player has been losing matches because of the weakness in the shot then it'll be pretty obvious to the player why he/she has to change. But if the player has been getting decent results and the coach is seeking to get the player to step up to a new standard it's less easy for the player to see the why he or she should change. 'Why should I change...I'm doing alright as I am'.

Next the coach has to demonstrate (model) the new technique and the player has to play it, feel it and ultimately get comfortable enough with it to use it in anger in a match. Not easy, and it takes time before the old subconsciously hit backhand is replaced by the new 'grooved' subconsciously hit backhand. The more engrained the old shot, the more energy will be needed to erase it and replace it with new shot.

And if the coach sees the player buckling under match pressure and reverting to the old stroke he/she has to step in get the player to stay on the transition path. Only

by doing this will the player improve his/her performance and feel emotionally comfortable enough to throw away the old shot in favour of the new.

The status quo...a barrier to change

You can see from this that in general it's more emotionally comfortable to keep on doing the things we've always done rather than doing something different. And even when people know 'rationally' that they need to change, they find it tough to change. Take someone who knows they need to lose weight but can't because they are grooved into the same eating patterns that cause them to take in more food that they burn off, leading to a constant upward incline in their weight. Perhaps friends or family members have always eaten certain sorts of food, dished up certain quantities or drunk a certain amount. Breaking away from these peer group rituals can be emotionally challenging unless the peers change too.

Or taking a more extreme case, an addiction, where perhaps a smoker knows that they are going to die if they don't give up smoking, but they simply can't do it, even though the consequences are obvious and fatal.

Behavioural change at scale

When we are dealing with behavioural change in the workplace, we face the same challenges, but instead of helping a single complex individual change from the old way to the new way, we now have to do it with hundreds and often thousands of people. Each person has different levels of 'grooving' with different reasons for changing or keeping things the way they are. And we can't provide each one with a personal coach, can we?

Addicted to the status quo

The more I've thought about it, the more I've come to understand that through this constant grooving, people become in effect 'addicted' to the status quo. Why wouldn't they? The status quo is grooved and 'safe' for them. Their peers are also grooved, and when thousands of people operate the same rituals and have the same understandings, you can see that to bring about a lasting change in behavior will take some thought and energy.

The status quo is well understood by everyone and so easy to keep doing, whereas the new way is often not well defined (sometimes it can't be) and people are often not engaged in a serious way (there's no time) to help them work out in the first instance what the change is about. In other words their rational understanding of the change is low.

We've learned that for many people, if they don't have a good rational understanding (i.e. they know the real truth about the change), they are inclined to reject it just because what is being proposed isn't clear (let alone compelling), given their lens on the world. They make all sorts of excuses for why they couldn't change. All very natural when you understand what's going actually going on.

So 'first base' in our programmes is getting real clarity about the change in some detail. The question's that needs to be answered (to the satisfaction of each individual at differing levels of detail) for people to gain a solid rational understanding are follows:

1. What is the change?
2. What will it be like when we've implemented it?
3. What do you want me to do differently?
4. Why are we doing it?
5. Why should I do it?
6. Will I be treated fairly, is everyone else going through the change?
7. How will it affect me and my community?
8. How will it work in practice?
9. How will we make the change? (i.e. what is the process by which we'll change)?
10. When will the change happen and what is the programme?

If you can answer all 10 questions about the change, we'd say you have a high level or rational understanding. That doesn't mean you will like the answers, but you are able to make your judgments about the gains and losses from the change for you personally in the light of the truth (and not hearsay or a story generated by colleagues.

The project team and the change journey

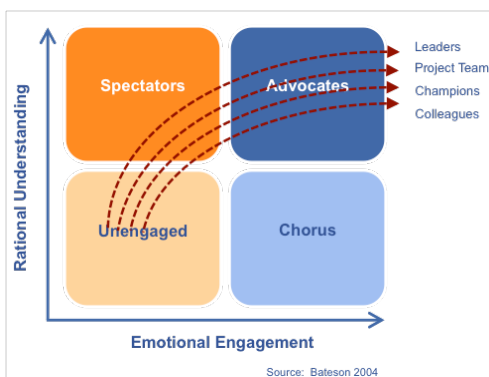
For the project team involved in the change, often answering all these questions is tough and in many cases the answers don't become clear until later in the programme. But if the project team can't come forward with truthful and credible answers to the questions that people can believe, then people might not feel very confident about being led by them on the 'change journey', the mental journey of understanding and determining the gains and losses from the change from their own personal standpoint and becoming emotionally engaged with the change.

Rational and emotional transitions

Only when people have been facilitated in going through the change journey can we be sure that they will make a rational AND emotional transition. In other words they will be in a place where they can accept and commit to the change.

But if people at all levels don't get the opportunity to be immersed in a process that facilitates their understanding of the truth of the change, because management don't see it as a big deal or because they don't have time etc., then people are deprived of an opportunity to go through the change journey and consequently may not go with the change.

So like the tennis player who won't commit to playing the new shot in competition, they cling to the old way, which they perceive to be safe and carry on doing this as they did before and so the change in behavior slides back to the old.



The power of leaders in behavioural change

Leaders at all levels are key. If a leader has already demonstrated his understanding and support for a change, it lends weight to the change and 'de-risks' it for the individual giving the 'permission' to change. I.e. if my leader says it's the way we should go then fine. Ditto if people who are respected (regardless of seniority) get on-board early and voice/demonstrate support, the same is true. The reverse is also true

too though. If a leader is either neutral or negative in his understanding and articulation of his/her support for the change then this will have an disproportional impact in undermining the change and make it more difficult for others to change as the new is not being supported.

That's why in any change process it's important to work at all levels to secure understanding and support. But it's even more important that leaders are one of the first communities to move forward with the mental change journey.

In summary

Grooved behaviours create a barrier to change. The more grooved the behaviours, the more difficult it is to achieve a lasting change and the more energy will be needed to effect it. To get people to change, they first need to know the truth about all aspects of the change to their satisfaction (rational understanding) before they can work out their wins and losses and get emotionally comfortable with the change. In large populations, an engagement process is needed that ensure everyone (regardless of status) goes through the process of gaining rational understanding and emotional engagement, and that... is what behavioural change management is all about.

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AWA is a management consultancy that helps transform business performance by implementing advanced, agile, work, place and management concepts better suited to today's modern business world.

We have supported some of the world's leading organisations in the public and private sectors and in recent years have transitioned over 22,000 people from the old ways of working to the new world of working.

Our approach is to offer building blocks of service, which can be tailored, to your needs. We are able to support you in developing strategies for change, delivering projects and supporting operational teams