How can we change behaviours?
What is a behaviour and what governs our behaviours?

Behaviours create results
Below can you read about what is required to achieve change, namely new behaviours. For it is only when we do something differently that change takes place, it is therefore valuable to focus all change efforts on concrete behaviours.

In most organisations changes are more or less a constant state. These changes almost always require some form of behaviour modification, because it's our behaviours that creates results. You could say that an organisation's performance is the sum of all employees' behaviours. From that perspective, it is important to understand what influences human behaviour to successfully achieve change.

What is a behaviour?
A basic rule to start out from is that a behaviour can be observed and measured. We often talk about acting proactively, being flexible and committed. These are typical qualities. The question is what they involve in the form of concrete behaviour for your work group. What do you do when you act proactively in your work group? What do you do when you are flexible in your work group? What does it entail in concrete terms?

If, for example, you feel that a colleague creates either a good or a bad atmosphere, it is based on behaviour that you have observed in this person. Try to work out what the person is doing to create a good or a bad atmosphere. For most people, saying that a person creates a good atmosphere is OK, but how do you say that a person is creating a bad atmosphere? It is considerably easier to talk about observable behaviour and perhaps draw attention to the fact that the individual has a deeply furrowed brow and doesn’t greet people in the morning means that others perceive her/him as creating a bad atmosphere.

Let’s say that you feel that the work group is being poorly led due to the fact that the manager is not present. What does present mean for you? Perhaps that the door to the office is open, or that she/he is in attendance at the joint meetings on Fridays? When talking about concrete behaviour, you can’t interpret things in different ways. Perhaps the manager feels that she/he is "present", while the staff don’t.

The closer to concrete behaviour you can get when deciding on your plan of action, the greater the chance of real change.

What governs our behaviours?
Our behaviour is governed primarily by what comes after the behaviour. Within OBM, Organisational Behaviour Management, the ABC model is used to describe what governs our behaviour.

A is for Antecedent, B is for Behaviour and C is for Consequence.

Let’s say that your manager asks you to put together a report (A), and you quickly write (B) and submit it. You don’t subsequently receive any feedback (C) and you fear that the report is lying untouched. The next time the manager asks you about a new report, just when you have a lot to do, you decide to put off writing the report because nothing happened last time. In this instance your behaviour is governed by the consequence of the previous episode despite the fact that your manager has asked you (A) to write another report. This time you wait to see whether there is any demand for the report or not.
The example shows that antecedents have a limited effect on our behaviour. There are several different types of consequences, but the most important thing to remember is that positive consequences have a greater effect on our behaviour, that is to say, if what I do leads to something positive for me, I am more willing to carry out the specific behaviour.

Punishments are sometimes needed, but they are not as powerful as positive consequences. In other cases you do something in order to avoid negative consequences. If the situation ever arises where you feel that people have not done what they have been asked to do, think about what the consequences would be if they didn't do it.

The more immediate the consequence is, the greater the likelihood is that the desired behaviour will take place. For example, the purpose of using seat belts is to reduce injury if an accident occurs. The likelihood of an accident occurring might seem remote and definitely not certain to happen. A lot of car manufacturers have incorporated a sound that continues until you put on your seat belt. This gets everyone in the car to put on their seat belt before driving away.

Antecedents initiate desirable behaviour, while consequences maintain them. For example, simply issuing new instructions is rarely sufficient, the system of consequences also needs to be changed. If you decide on concrete behaviour in your plan of action, you will receive reminders and advice to help you remember to do your new behaviour.

Would you like further reading?

Below are some suggestions:
Bringing out the best in people, Aubrey C. Daniels
Unlock Behaviour, Leslie W. Braksick
Contact us
We help our clients strengthen employee engagement, develop leadership and improve their employer brand and the loyalty of their customers. We measure and analyse employee and customer attitudes to initiate and sustain change processes that have an impact. We know that sustainable organisational change is about changing behaviours.

During more than 20 years we have helped companies create successful change through a combination of methodology, easy to use processes and IT-engineering. We are happy to share our experiences with you, hoping that it will help you increase the speed of change within your company.

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