The "Rational-Person" Assumption, The Failure of Good Intentions, and Leading for Effective Change

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INTRODUCTION

American founding father Benjamin Franklin once said that the only things in the world of which we could be certain were death and taxes. The unstated implication of this statement is that everything else is subject to change, so change might be the third aspect of life of which we can be certain. Certainly, in the business world, we are acutely aware of the march of change. The rate of change in the world is faster now than it has ever been, and the rate of change is accelerating.

Thomas Friedman (2005), in his recent best-selling book "The World is Flat", outlined several factors that he believed were driving change in today's world. These factors were the globalization of markets, the global flow of information, and the rate of technology change, all of which are accelerating. Customer expectations are changing. Competitor offerings are changing. And many companies are struggling to keep up with the rate of change that is required to simply remain relevant, let alone flourish.

Despite our awareness of the need for change, and despite the enormous amount of effort that is poured into identifying the required changes and planning for those changes, today's organizations are decidedly poor at actually implementing change. The Ken Blanchard Companies, an organizational change consulting company, claims that up to 70% of all major organizational change initiatives fail.

FACTORS UNDERMINING CHANGE EFFECTIVENESS

Why is it that change efforts are so unsuccessful? There are numerous factors involved, but some of the biggest factors are related to the assumptions about change that are commonly held. Many companies go into a change effort with best intentions. They truly want to accomplish the change, and they want to do it the "right way".

The first major assumption that they hold about change is that, if they build a good enough change plan, then the change will happen. They build the business case for the needed changes. They put together their communication plan to inform every one of the

need for change. They build a detailed project management plan for the steps of the change, including identifying all of the individual-level/role changes that must take place if the overall change is to be accomplished. The second major assumption that they hold about change is that, if they can convince those that are required to make individual-level changes that the larger, organizational change is necessary and worth doing (sometimes called getting "buy in"), then the change will happen. The third major assumption that they hold about change is that, if they train and equip those that must make individual-level changes as part of the organizational change so that they are able to do the necessary behaviors, then the change will happen.

All of the above assumptions implicitly assume that people are fundamentally rational in our approach to decision making about the choices that we make. The major problem with these assumptions is that the rational conclusion that is drawn – if I do these things, then the change will happen – is false! Many are not initially convinced that the conclusion is false because they themselves hold these assumptions, but it is surprisingly easy to "prove" the inadequacy of these assumptions by asking two simple questions.

The first question that exposes the flaw in these assumptions to most people is "How many of you have ever made a New Year's resolution?" If one asks this question of a group, typically, every hand in the room goes up. The second question that exposes the flaws in these assumptions is, "How many of you have ever kept, to your own satisfaction, a New Year's resolution that you have made?" When asked of the same group, typically, every, or almost every, hand goes down. A recent morning television talk show reported that 80% of all New Year's resolutions have been abandoned by February 1st! Those whose hands remain in the air, when asked what successful resolution they were able to make and keep, most often respond "I resolved never to make another New Year's resolution!"

So, how do these questions prove the inadequacy of the rational change assumptions? The failure to keep our own New Year's resolutions shows that, even when we select a change that is highly valued by us, and when we are fully capable of doing the things required to make the change, we are still unable to make the change. Clearly, we can check the box for getting "buy in" for the change given that we are the ones choosing the change that we want to make, and for reasons that are highly personal and highly valuable to us. Additionally, with the most typical New Year's resolutions, we already know what new behaviors are required, and we are fully capable of doing them. For example, if we decide that we want to lose weight, we typically know that there are two ways that this might be accomplished – by either eating less, or by exercising more – both of which are entirely under our control. And yet we struggle immensely to accomplish the change.

This illustration has enormous implications for those that are attempting to lead change in an organizational context because we often find ourselves holding others to a standard that we cannot meet. This is further confounded by one of the best-known findings of social psychology – the fundamental attribution error – which defines a common bias that occurs when individuals make decisions about which factors they believe caused

the behaviors exhibited by themselves and others. Simply stated, the fundamental attribution error states that, when we make causal attributions about ourselves, particularly our failures, we often blame our circumstances. However, when we make causal attributions about others, particularly their failures, we tend to place more emphasis on their intentions and character. For example, when WE are late for work, we explain our behaviors in terms of our circumstances - maybe our alarm didn't go off that morning because of a power outage, or perhaps our car didn't start. When someone else is late for work, we are much more apt to attribute it to their character or intentions – THEY were late for work because they are lazy!

The 18th century philosopher, Immanuel Kant, famously outlined criteria for attributing causation. First, there must be contiguity between two events – the appear close to one another in time and space. Second, we will examine the succession of events – one event must occur prior to the second event. Finally, we must infer an irreversible progression – the second event occurs if and only if the first event has taken place. This understanding of causality is closely related to Sir Isaac Newton's third law of motion – for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. The cause must precede the effect.

In cases of behavior exhibited by other people, this bias, combined with the rational change assumptions, creates a vicious cycle in the interactions between those that are charged with getting others to change and the targets of their attempts to influence. The influencers believe that they have done what is necessary to cause change (explaining, equipping, and training), and yet the desired changes don't occur. Lacking any clear external factors, it is easy for the change agent to infer that it is the internal characteristics of their workers that are to blame for the lack of change. They are lazy. They are unmotivated. They are "resistant to change". This conclusion, in turn, leads them to increase the intensity of their influence attempts, using ever-more aversive methods in the cycle that Aubrey Daniels calls the "Louder, Longer, Meaner" cycle (Daniels, 2000).

Quality guru, W. Edwards Deming, was famous for asserting that the pessimism around the character of employees was unfounded. He confronted this kind of thinking by claiming that, if you change all the people and the same problems are likely to reoccur, then the problem isn't the people. The problems that most companies have don't lie within their employees, but rather within the organizational systems within which their employees make choices and behave. The conclusion that must be drawn is that, if change is to be accomplished (either by ourselves or by others) something MORE is needed than is addressed in the rational assumptions for change. This "something more" that is needed is leadership, and behavior analysis has provided the lens that we need to clearly see what needs to be done.

TWO REINFORCEMENT PARADIGMS FOR SUSTAINING CHANGE

B.F. Skinner defined the three-term operant contingency as a fundamental way to view the dynamics of behavior and identify the factors involved with both sustaining and changing behavior. Today, we typically talk about the ABC's of behavior when we discuss Skinner's model. The "A" stands for antecedents for behavior, the "B" stands for behavior itself, and the "C" stands for the consequences that follow the behavior.

Antecedents are the changes that provide information to the actor about the environment and the context for choosing the behaviors in which we might engage. These are the traditional "causes" for behavior in that they precede behavior and are the discriminative stimuli that allow a respondent to choose a particular response for a given context. The responses of people are not the same, however, as the Newtonian reactions of an inanimate object to an applied force. The same set of antecedents may trigger vastly different responses in different people depending on their behavioral repertoires and reinforcement histories. Additionally, antecedents, when not paired with a meaningful consequence for the behaviors they prompt, will become ineffective over time.

Of course, it is the behavior that we are most interested in as change agents because this is what must change if the organization is to accomplish its objectives. As Bill Abernathy argued (2008), organizations don't change, people do; organizations don't behave, people do. It is worth noting that all work is behavior, and that behavior is sustained, not by its antecedents, but by its consequences. For example, if you came across the following job posting, how many of you would sign up for the job:

Wanted: Laborer to perform the following tasks – Lift seven-kilogram object. Transport seven-kilogram object a distance of 5 meters without mechanical assistance (must be done by hand). Throw object as hard as possible. Repeat approximately once per minute.

Some people might ask "how much does the job pay?", but most people would immediately determine that they have no interest in the job. After all, who would want to do such boring and physically demanding work? You might be surprised to know that you are extremely likely to not have not only done this "work" but to have paid someone else for the privilege of doing it. The job posting above is a behavioral definition of 10-pin bowling!

The fundamental differences between the job that no one wants and the game that people are willing to pay money to play is not inherent in the behavior itself, but rather in the feedback and consequences that we experience when we do the task. This is the fundamental insight of B. F. Skinner and his understanding of behavior. Behaviorists define four different categories of consequences based on the relationship between a given behavior and the outcomes that occur upon its performance. Two categories of consequences produce less behavior: 1) punishment, which occurs when we do something and then experience an aversive outcome (one that we don't like, including penalties), and 2) extinction, which occurs when our behavior is followed by a lack of discernible outcomes (the behavior will die out).

Of course, with change we are trying to encourage more of a given behavior, so we are more interested in positive reinforcement (when a behavior is followed by a consequence that results in an increase in the rate of that behavior) and negative reinforcement (when a behavior causes the removal of an aversive condition), the two different categories of consequences that will increase the rate of behavior.

Daniels (2000) asserted that negative reinforcement can only result in compliance, or the least behavior required to get by and escape or avoid an undesired outcome. Daniels also asserted that negative reinforcement was a form of antecedent control, given that an undesired state must be established before the onset of behavior, for example, by issuing a threat to "motivate" a person to do something.

In contrast, positive reinforcement results in discretionary behavior, which Daniels and Daniels (2007) defined as "that behavior which a person could do if they choose, but for which they would not be punished if they didn't." (p. 16) When positive reinforcement is the dominant paradigm, employees will go above and beyond the minimum required (compliance), and the potential for excellence in an organization increases dramatically.

REINFORCEMENT ARTIFACTS FOR THE INFLUENCER

While it may seem obvious that positive reinforcement is the far-superior approach to take when leading change (and it is!), it is often difficult for an influencer to learn this from experience. Research has shown that immediate consequences have a far larger impact on behavior than delayed consequences and has also shown that consequences that result with a higher probability have a greater impact on behavior than those that occur with a lower probability.

These "truths" have a confounding effect on the ability of an influencer to learn the benefits of positive reinforcement. Aversive controls like negative reinforcement often have a much more immediate and reliable effect on behavior than do initial attempts to use positive reinforcement. Ironically, attempts to use aversive controls are positively reinforced! The influencer gets more behavior (which they want), and it happens immediately and with greater certainty than do initial attempts at positive reinforcement. Initial attempts at positive reinforcement, in contrast, often have a much smaller effect on behavior (the uptake of the new behavior may begin slowly), and the changes are less certain to occur than those that result from negative reinforcement. This leads to a situation where attempts to use positive reinforcement may be extinguished by lack of reinforcement! In fact, it is not uncommon to hear people say, "I've tried positive reinforcement, and it doesn't work."

IMPLICATIONS

So, what does all of this mean for the person who wants to be an effective leader of change within their organization? First, check your assumptions about change. One way to do this is to ask yourself what you are learning about your employees. Are you

becoming convinced that they are lazy, irresponsible, and "resistant to change"? If you are, then chances are good that, despite your best intentions, you have likely fallen into the trap of the fundamental attribution error and the insufficient assumptions of rational change. You may be perpetuating the Louder, Longer, Meaner cycle of negative reinforcement despite your good intentions.

If, on the other hand, you are learning about all of ways that your employees are wonderfully creative in overcoming barriers to performance and growing prouder each day at the effort that they are giving, then you are reaping one of the many benefits that comes with the systematic use of positive reinforcement. It is much more constructive for a leader to realize that what some interpret as resistance to change is actually behavioral momentum. Behavior analysis teaches us that the behaviors that presently exist in any organization are occurring because they are being reinforced. If we want change, it is the leader's responsibility to change the consequences that the followers follow and provide positive consequences for the needed behaviors.

Secondly (and finally), the "power" of a leader is directly linked to their ability to provide positive reinforcement to their followers. Every behavior that is done in the workplace is followed by both naturally occurring consequences that are an inextricable part of their work. Many of these naturally-occurring consequences are negative and will act as punishers for their behaviors. The realm of leadership is in the provision of socially-provided consequences that come as two individuals interact around the work that is being done. In fact, I will argue that leadership is the systematic application of positive reinforcement. To use an American-centric example, employees will decide for themselves what colour hat they "see" you as wearing when they encounter you (in American Western movies, the good guys wear white hats, while the bad guys wear black hats). If your employees perceive you as one who relies heavily on negative reinforcement when influencing them, they will "see" you as wearing a black hat – you are the bad guy! Bad guys have a hard time positively reinforcing others because they are perceived as being an antecedent that predicts aversive consequences. If, on the other hand, your employees perceive you as an antecedent that predicts the availability of positive consequences, they will "see" you as wearing a white hat, and you will be much more effective as a leader.

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Jonathan Krispin is Assistant Professor of Management, joining the Langdale College of Business at Valdosta State University in January, 2013, returning to academics after a 17-year career in the private sector. His research interests are primarily in the areas of organizational culture, business process improvement, organizational change, and leadership development. After completing his Ph.D. in Social and Organizational Psychology from Temple University in Philadelphia, PA in 1997, Jonathan joined the Prestolite Wire Corporation, a Tier One Supplier in the Automotive Industry. While there, he led the effort to implement a leadership and process improvement process that resulted in a 20% productivity improvement, and commensurate improvements in quality and safety. Based on these and other achievements, the plant was awarded the Georgia Oglethorpe Award for Organizational Excellence (based on the Malcolm Baldrige Award Criteria) in 2000 by the Governor of Georgia. In 2002, Jonathan joined Heatcraft Worldwide Refrigeration, the commercial refrigeration division of Lennox International. In 2004, while he was Acting Director of Operations for the Tifton manufacturing plant, the Georgia Department of Technical and Adult Education recognized the facility he led as the mid-sized Manufacturer of the Year. Jonathan continued at Heatcraft in several positions of increasing responsibility, including roles as a Master Blackbelt in the Lennox LeanSigma program, and then as Global Operations Leader for Marketing and Product Development, coordinating efforts across operations in North America, South America, Europe, China and Australia. In 2008, Jonathan joined Pinnacle Prime Contractors in Valdosta, GA, first as Vice President for Human Resources, then Vice President of Operations, and finally as Executive Vice President, a role in which he remained until leaving the company to return to academics. Over the years, Jonathan has also regularly engaged in consulting relationships on a part-time basis, and his clients have spanned a variety of industries and include Ritz Carlton Hotels, the Hardin Construction Company, Cooper Tire Corporation, and Regal Boats.