

Time for Change

MANAGERS ARE STILL UNSURE ABOUT HOW TO CHANGE BEHAVIOUR

By Nik Kinley

In recent years, many businesses have invested in training managers to coach and develop their people. Yet new research suggests that far more support for managers is still needed.

Changing people's behaviour is one of the most difficult and complex tasks of management. It is rare to find it actually called "behaviour change" in any job description. However, whether we call it coaching, training or development, what we are trying to do is to change how people behave in order to improve their performance. Not only is it a difficult task, but most managers appear to be stuck with trying to do it with a deeply limited set of tools and techniques.

A global survey was recently conducted with thousands of business leaders and managers. When asked what the main behaviours were that they needed to develop in others, the top five responses were:

- Drive and work motivation
- Management and supervisory skills
- Collaboration and teamwork
- Interpersonal skills
- Attitude

Equally unsurprising as those responses was the list of the main methods managers report using to change the above behaviours: feedback, coaching and training. However, when these leaders and managers were asked how often their attempts to change people's behaviour worked, the response – on average – was just under 50 per cent. Half the time it seems to work, and half the time it doesn't. And when we dig into these figures further, it reveals something fascinating.

According to the survey, if you ask managers how confident they are about helping other people to identify and understand what behaviours they need to change, 72 per cent say they find this easy. And if you ask them how confident they are about giving feedback, 75 per cent say that they find that easy, too. Yet only 35 per cent say that they are confident about which techniques to use, and only 10 per cent say that they feel confident about making sure behaviours stick and stay changed over time.

However hard and complex behaviour change may be, managers ought to feel well equipped for the task. One reason they are not lies in the fact that "behaviour change" is a phrase hardly ever heard. Fields that have a great deal to say about how to change people's behaviour – such as behaviour economics and psychotherapy – are rarely referred to and drawn upon.

The words we use matter. The language of "learning and development" engenders a line of thinking and the consideration of issues that are quite different from the ones that are raised if we talk of "behaviour change." The challenge of changing behaviour is just not the same as the challenge of imparting information or teaching skills, and not talking about it prevents us from recognizing these different challenges and acting to meet them. To improve the support that we as HR professionals are able to offer managers, we are going to first need to change how we talk about the issue. ■

Nik Kinley is a director and the head of talent strategy for the global talent management consultancy YSC. He has specialized in the fields of assessment and behaviour change for nearly 25 years.

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