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FOR DEVELOPING TALENT



OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO BEHAVIOR CHANGE

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SCIENCE OF LEARNING

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OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO BEHAVIOR CHANGE



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Does this sound familiar? You are asked to lead a change program. Perhaps you are a member of the team, a manager, an HR professional, or an external training partner (what, for simplicity's sake, we will refer to as a “change agent” in this issue of *TD at Work*). You’ve discovered a great training tool or model that fits the organization’s needs perfectly, and you have a vested interest in the program’s delivery and subsequent success.

Initial impressions are that the program has been a huge success. The participants gain insights, know what changes need to take place, and have practiced the associated new skills and behavior. Three months later during the evaluation, you realize the learning was never really transferred to the job. Change didn’t take place as quickly or as thoroughly as desired or expected. So, you’re facing a big disappointment and maybe a major waste of time, energy, and money.

Effective learning and development models, and the concepts behind them, can only be successfully taken onboard if we understand human behavior. Cognitive behavior psychology shows us that even people who genuinely want to change find it difficult. As Simon Sinek explains in *Leaders Eat Last*, brain science confirms that people need to feel involved in driving the change, rather than being threatened by it.

Our C Step program—which has origins in Parenting With Love and Limits, an evidence-based treatment model for families, focuses on people, not just learning plans.

In this *TD at Work* you will learn:

- why behavior change doesn’t always happen
- the three major blockers preventing change
- steps you can take to ensure the best chance of success with changing behavior.

EVEN THOUGH INDIVIDUALS WANT TO CHANGE, THEY FIND IT HARD TO DO SO AND DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY.

WHY CAN'T WE CHANGE?

We have seen in our work that, when planning change, many organizations focus on the plan and not the people. The psychological aspects of change are not addressed, decisions are made in the boardroom and not on the work floor, and there is a noticeable lack of follow-up and feedback. All of which means that, even though individuals want to change, they find it hard to do so and don’t understand why.

Often, change plans are too complex and inconsistent. Effort and money is invested in new systems and initiatives that don’t succeed. Employees are trained in new techniques and expected to adopt the behaviors needed for an organizational change. But the human factor is not taken into account. We tend to be too optimistic and assume that if participants seem to be willing and able to change, they will.

The reality is that we don’t always do the things we want to do. We all know we shouldn’t wait until the last minute to finish a project, just as we all know we should visit our aging aunt, go to the gym, or organize our office. We know we *should* do these things. However, it is just not feasible for a human being to fulfill all of these social demands and requirements. We are not robots.

The good news is that the neuroplasticity of the human brain allows for change. The bad news is that our brain prefers homeostasis and longs for what it knows best. Many of your employees are already sufficiently self-aware to know where their opportunities for improvement lie and which pitfalls to avoid. But too often, training sessions are focused on the superficial aspects of behavior change.

In addition, there is little attention given to understanding the existing behavior and how employees have benefited from it. People do not understand why they are there. This understanding is necessary before starting to change anything.

In the past decade, there has been a substantial amount of research about behavior change. People have the tendency to hold on to their attitudes, traits, and behaviors even when (or especially when) their managers try to convince them otherwise. For many people, change brings

feelings of uncertainty, stress, and a lack of control (Stoffer 2002; Weeks, Roberts, Chonko, and Jones 2004). This means that the prefrontal cortex of their brain underperforms, and they fall back on earlier behavioral patterns and habits (Duhigg 2012).

Awareness of common change blockers and how to deal with them will help you make change happen more efficiently and with longer-lasting results.

Resistance to Change

Change blockers are the part of us that make us resist change and limit our abilities to embrace it. They are emotional strategies that we've developed over time to avoid pain and discomfort. The result of these blockers is that we often won't or can't take on sufficient responsibility to develop ourselves (or members of our team).

These patterns may involve both fear of change in general and fear of specific negative consequences that a certain kind of change can

CHANGE BLOCKERS: POSITIVES AND NEGATIVES

Change blockers get in our way when we intend to change behavior. These emotional strategies protect us from the discomfort we may experience during a change. Our brain may know change would be beneficial, but it cannot easily overcome these hurdles. By understanding the positive and negative aspects of change blockers, we can work with them.

Change Blocker	Positive	Negative
Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevents us from taking dangerous risks. Encourages us to build our skills to overcome these obstacles. Gives us strong physical warning signals. Without this change blocker, we would make hasty decisions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fear often takes over and, before we know it, we become cowards. We start to fear small things that are not dangerous at all. It can become paralyzing. When we don't challenge this change blocker, we may develop an avoidance strategy and never step out of our comfort zone.
Laziness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Takes care of our energy level. Makes sure the effort we put into something is worthwhile. Helps us set physical limits. Without this change blocker, we would be executing every new idea or engaging in everything asked of us, resulting in complete exhaustion. Patterns of comfort feel good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Laziness prohibits us from making healthy decisions. Often we know what to do, but doing it requires energy and effort that we don't want to expend. Laziness leads us to believe that the desired result is out of reach. We do not take the steps to get closer to our goal.
Resignation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gives us personal stability. Helps us accept realistically what we can and cannot do. Helps us put the human condition in perspective. Helps us pick our battles. Without this change blocker, we might lack self-awareness. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rigidity prevents us from being open to trying new things or starting new projects. We are convinced that certain limits are true at all times and in all situations. We do not dare question old behavior patterns and ways of thinking. It limits our possibilities.