



MAKING THEM LISTEN

ABSTRACT

The challenges of the 21st Century can be better tackled with the help of effective behaviour change programmes.

Motivation Matters Limited



Introduction

We all know that any training, coaching or mentoring is a two way process. Regardless of how the training is delivered, face to face or internet based, the learning outcomes depend on both the trainer and trainee.

Some training is to do with the transfer of knowledge. How to type in bold is a piece of information that is teachable, demonstrable and is quickly accepted.

Coaching and mentoring are more to do with changes of behaviour than learning simple skills. Learning new behaviours is a very different process to learning how to type in bold.

New behaviour has to supplant the old behaviour and this is very difficult with interpersonal skills that are used in a social context. It is always possible to argue the social context not the behaviour determines the outcome.

Why don't people listen?

We all carry around in our heads a memory of everything that has ever happened to and around us. What you are saying or doing is added to that mass of memories, of experiences. Your voice is louder because it is in the here and now but there are thousands of other voices competing for the listener's belief.

I call this The Barrier. Any behaviour change intervention has to get over The Barrier to succeed. These accumulated memories and experiences lead us to have expectations. Hoodie-clad youths have been banned from some shopping malls because the expectation is of anti-social behaviour. Experience gives rise to expectations and we create stereotypes to direct our decisions.

There is a strong survival basis for this. The avoidance of dangerous situations is a good basis for a long life!

If you feel your current situation is dangerous you are not going to be receptive to new ideas. Your body and brain are geared to fight or flee, not to consider the finer points of dining etiquette.

Primitive man was not particularly fast or strong but emerged as the dominant species. We did that because of our brain development. Our brains allowed us to store experiences and use them to make better decisions: to avoid the water hole at dusk.

Our brain and senses are particularly sensitive to change. We are not very precise at guessing temperatures but extremely accurate at comparative judgements – hotter or colder. This survival mechanism lets us survey the scene and take in the activity. We see the grass blowing in the wind and the birds diving for fish. Imagine now some grass moving





Overcoming the Barrier

against the wind or the birds taking flight. What does that signal? Does that spell danger? I can feel the adrenaline surge just from writing it.

Fortunately there are ways to overcome The Barrier and instil new behaviours. The innate sensitivity to change can be used to demonstrate the benefits of new behaviour.

Starting in a small way the new behaviour can be shown to produce new and desirable outcomes. Repeating the behaviour and noticing the outcome allows the individual to see the benefit of the new behaviour.

Accepting the new behaviour as the standard takes a considerable time and varies by individuals. My experience is that major culture change programmes take two years to permanently change the behaviour of 95% of the people.

You can reduce this time by increasing the power/threat of the change imperative but the consequent behavioural changes are much more unpredictable.

Making the change permanent

The memory of the outcomes of new behaviour must be reinforced consistently. Anyone who has tried to give up smoking for their health knows how difficult that is. After a few days a cigarette makes you feel a lot better!

Change is often described as a three stage forming, storming, norming process. Festinger's Theory of Cognitive Dissonance puts it more helpfully. In my words, the theory says that people can hold dissonant ideas for some time but it becomes increasingly uncomfortable. Sooner or later the ideas will change so they are then logically consistent.

To use the smoking example again, you may know your health is suffering through smoking but you continue. You want to stop smoking but you can't. You will need to resolve the inconsistency eventually.

When you stop smoking your mind can return to consistency and peace.

To make change permanent you must consistently show the new behaviour and new outcomes are beneficial.

Making The Barrier work for you

The established new behaviour will be protected by The Barrier. Reach this wondrous place and the need for consistency and coherence is diminished.

This allows experiment to begin to discover new behaviours and outcomes that are superior to our recently learned ones. You can see that overlapping change interventions are difficult. One set of behaviours and outcomes has to be reinforced at the same time as new behaviour and outcome couplets are being tested.

This is why a behaviour change programme has a natural timescale.





Top tips to make them listen

Be trusted
Be trustworthy
Be recommended
Be consistent
Be steady, not too fast
Be in a calm threat free situation
Be aware of different communication preferences
Be coherent across all communication channels
Be ready for that Cognitive dissonance flip
Be aware of all the other voices in their ears!

MOTIVATION MATTERS LIMITED

VISION

Inspiring good management, and thus achievement, within organizations will improve employee attitudes, engagement and job satisfaction to create stronger companies with more productive people.
More productive companies build competitive advantage creating a sustainable business with safe growth, healthy profits, secure well paid jobs and contribute to the well-being of the UK.

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