Key Ingredients for Changing Behavior

Instead of preaching prevention and avoidance of terrible outcomes, deftly apply the art of positive motivation.

By Robert Pater  Jun 13, 2007

I recently heard a manager delightedly speak about the "miraculous" changes he saw in his company's Safety performance and culture.

Because breakthrough leadership aims for such step changes, one of the bottom-line questions best leaders ask themselves is, "What does it really take to change behavior?"

Here's what I've found from seeing such dramatic statistical and cultural results in a wide array of companies worldwide. In my experience, there are five key ingredients that all must be mixed into the baking of new, nourishing behaviors.

1. They have to want it. First things first--it matters less whether you expect to see new skills in place; people have to be interested in and want these for themselves. This is the chocolate vs. lima beans principle: The leader's initial job is create hunger for the new actions, rather than guilt or obligation that they should taste, chew, and swallow the new food.

   In the Safety arena, go beyond a tired approach of preaching prevention and avoidance of terrible outcomes that others don't believe--or want to consider--would ever happen to them. Instead, deftly apply the art of positive motivation, enlisting identification, personal benefits, off-work improvements, relevance to family, and more to pique their interest and excitement toward trying something new.

2. They have to believe it's possible for them. You can demand anything you want, demonstrate impressive attributes, or describe the loftiest qualities. But people will seriously attempt only what they think is within their realm. One problem is many people have unrealistic views of their own capabilities, thinking they're better than they are at some things and more diminished than they really are at others.

   So one essential piece of leaders' jobs is to project the confidence and sureness that what they expect is learnable and doable. But positive talk is certainly not enough; if it were, "will" and "strong-mindedness" would be the only things required. (Too many leaders fall down here in over-relying on these.) It's critical to make changes easy to incorporate--sequenced into progressive, bite-sized pieces--that they believe they can easily apply with relatively little time commitment.

3. They have to know how. Changing is more than positive thinking. The bottom line is doing something different. Leaders have to know and show how to implement real, powerful skills and strategies more specific than "think before you act" or "watch what you're doing."
For example, there are sets of mental and physical skillsets that can show immediate and dramatic improvements in directing attention, elevating keener judgment, and boosting eye-hand coordination, range of motion, balance, and leveraging strength—all of which can quickly heighten safe behaviors for preventing a range of personal injuries. But you have to show how these methods work (hint: kinesthetically, having them experience these), then how to apply them to their actual tasks.

4. They have to practice. Even if they want to change and know how to, people make daily behavioral modifications only when they re-form daily habits into new defaults. I've seen several highly successful approaches for practicing desired behaviors, including enlisting peer change agents toward creating a grassroots culture of targeted actions, coaching, applications to off-work hobbies and interests, and carefully done behavioral auditing.

People are most likely to continue those behaviors they see require relatively little effort for big payback. Because they know the importance of creating positive momentum, breakthrough leaders concentrate on easy-to-learn skills that show significant improvements, especially in the beginning of behavior change interventions.

5. New actions have to be reinforced. Plan to strengthen the use of newly grown behaviors. Significant changes are based on improvements in individuals’ skills, along with consistent organizational backing for change. Perhaps due to production overload, many organizations misstep in their behavioral reinforcement efforts. By themselves, freshly crafted procedures, executive proclamations, or one-exposure training are not enough to produce lasting behavioral change.

In addition, I've found that emphasizing self-monitoring skills for work and home can demonstrably enable people to make ongoing recalibrations and reinforce new behaviors.

Other vehicles for supporting just-acquired skills include recognition systems, charting-and-reporting-back on a range of leading indicators, spot coaching, and more. Create a multiple path reinforcement plan and continue walking it.

Highest-level leaders know that it's possible to make significant changes when people are self-motivated, learn easily applied skills, can see a positive difference from acting in new ways, and are reminded of their successes. Positive habits replace older, limited ones—and "miraculous" results bloom.

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