

Creating Culturally Sensitive Behavior Change in Organizations

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Many organizations are seeking to create a “global footprint.” In doing so, many common business practices need to be sensitive to, and adjusted for, the impact of local culture on the implementation of such practices.

This article introduces perspectives on how to create individual and organizational behavior change in response to organization assessments and development efforts (employee surveys, multisource feedback, etc.) in a way that is sensitive to the regional and organizational cultures where the change is desired.

Our framework considers behavior change from four perspectives:

1. Universal behavior change principles—factors and theories of behavior change that are common across cultures (e.g., motivation, reinforcement of desired behaviors).
2. Local culture behavior change facets—aspects of local culture that we should identify when creating local behavior change (e.g., perceptions of leadership, degree of formality).
3. Organizational culture influences—influences of global organizations on individual behavior and perceptions (e.g., leadership competencies defined by organization).
4. Individual and group differences—some of the individual and group characteristics that should be considered when creating behavior change.

Universal Behavior Change Principles

Multiple motivation theories have been investigated with respect to organizations and their employees, but few such theories have resulted in generalizable results like self-efficacy in employee motivation. Self-efficacy influences motivation through experiences of behavior and subsequent success, the ability to adapt to situations, and the resulting belief in our capacity for an activity. Self-efficacy also affects employees’ intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic

motivation results in a profound interest and involvement in the work. There are some cases where a high intrinsic motivation can compensate for a deficiency in expertise or skills.

In contrast to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation is the performance of behavior in order to obtain a separate outcome (e.g., praise, salary increase). The effects of extrinsic motivation are often tempered by the degree of autonomy of the activity. Those activities that are less autonomous will see less benefit from the motivational stimuli than those over which an individual has more influence. It is important to note that although extrinsic rewards may help people adopt behaviors, such external reinforcement may not be reliable for sustained long-term change.

Local Culture Behavior Change Facets

Although we know there are universal aspects to behavior change and motivation, it would be wrong to believe that all individuals in all geographic cultures respond to the same processes and strategies of behavior change in the same way. A direct method of confrontation of one’s strengths and opportunities may be welcomed and influential in one country, yet humiliating and demotivating in another. So, as we work to create change, we need to be aware of different facets from a local culture perspective that can influence this change.

The work done by Geert Hofstede (1973, 1980, 2001) reflects the importance of such local sensitivity when trying to achieve change in individuals and groups. Hofstede evaluated employee values at IBM in the early 1970s, focusing on more than 40 countries, and developed a set of four dimensions that he used to differentiate different geographical cultures.

- The first of these dimensions is *Power Distance*, which reflects the extent to which individuals in the organization expect power to be distributed equally or unequally.

- Hofstede's second dimension focused on *Individualism* (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman and Gupta, 2004 discuss this as Collectivism). Here the focus is on how much a culture values independent behavior—looking out for our own needs—versus collectivist behavior—where everyone is responsible for others.
- *Masculinity* is the third of Hofstede's dimensions. In general, this dimension reflects the extent to which a culture values assertiveness (masculinity) versus modesty and caring (femininity).
- The fourth dimension is *Uncertainty Avoidance*, which reflects the extent to which a group or organization relies on rules, formalized processes and norms to manage or address uncertainty (unpredictability) of events.
- Beyond the four dimensions originally proposed, Hofstede introduced a fifth, *Long-Term Orientation* (contrasting with a Short-Term Orientation) (Hofstede, 2001).

As we work to create behavior change in a global organization, the key is to look beyond the global goals and issues and determine what challenges and defining factors should be handled at the local level.

Organizational Culture Influences

The last 30 years have seen the emergence of the organizational culture debate as a way to understand human systems. Culture is generically and simplistically described as "the way we do things around here." It is, however, a more complex system that manifests itself in symbols, heroes, rituals and values, and includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs and any capabilities and habits acquired by individuals as members of society.

Hofstede's seminal work defines culture as "The collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another...the interactive aggregate of common characteristics that influence a human group's response to the environment," (Hofstede, 1980). He believes this programming derives from one's social culture (Hofstede, 1991). However, he also argues that organizational cultures should be distinguished from national cultures, the former differing most on "practices" (symbols, rituals and heroes), and the latter differing most on values. This is supported by Schneider's view that... "organizations are the people in them. . . people make the place. . . we have tried to change organizations by changing their structures and processes when it was the people that needed changing. With changes in people, the necessary changes in structure and process will occur" (Schneider, 1987).

On the other side of the spectrum, Edgar Schein argues that an organization's culture determines the nature of its members. He

has taken a systems approach and has borrowed heavily from anthropology and sociology to define the building blocks of culture: "The culture of a group can now be defined as: A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems;" (Schein, 1990).

In other words, Schein argues that culture is the outcome of the shared experiences arising from an organization's attempts to resolve fundamental problems of adapting to the external world and achieving internal integration and consistency. This, in turn, constructs a collective pool of knowledge that determines appropriate behavior, directs understanding and gives guidance on how to resolve problems.

The Influence of Leadership

"Organizational culture is the key to organizational excellence... and the function of leadership is the creation and management of culture." (Schein, 1990)

The role of leadership is critical in defining a culture; the values, beliefs and assumptions provide a "visible and articulated model for how the group should be structured and how it should function," (Schein, 1983). Organizations typically capture this in the form of leadership competencies to be followed and role-modeled by leaders and managers alike. It promotes the proliferation of a dynamic learning that takes place between leaders and employees and gradually sustains and evolves shared assumptions characteristic of a particular organizational culture.

Organizational culture thus provides a valuable platform from which to capture the deeper characteristics and underlying qualities of the workforce as a whole and becomes the starting point for constructive behavioral change and organizational development.

Individual and Group Influences on Behavior Change

Some infer that an individual's personality shapes experiences through the selection of the behaviors in which we engage, and that this occurrence is an important influence on behavior change. The combination of an individual and their behavioral choices is referred to as the interactionist approach.

Additional factors that contribute to behavior change, and affect how individuals react to it, include work experiences such as spending time with different people, reporting to different managers, attending to different role models and experiencing different mentors.

In terms of groups, goal-setting processes influence behavior change. Groups that have both collective and individual goals that support the group-behavior outcome goals will experience a more effective behavioral shift than those that do not adhere to the collective and associated individual goals.

An additional aspect of the group environment that affects individual behavior is social facilitation. This occurs primarily through the concept of social identity—the notion that we adhere to certain aspects of a social group through the identification with certain expressions of the group norms and values. Groups that are “tight”—or more homogeneous in their experiences—will experience greater social facilitation of their subsequent behavior than groups that are more heterogeneous. This is particularly true in cultures where a more collectivist nature is the norm.

Summary

There are multiple influences on behavior change to consider when planning and executing organizational change initiatives. From basic motivation and reward theories to cultural and organizational differences, the influences on behavior and subsequent organizational change are multi-faceted. The objective of this effort was to provide a context for those engaged in designing and executing behavior change in organizations across geographies. ■

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Jeffrey A. Jolton, Ph.D., is the director of global services at Kenexa, overseeing the project management and thought leadership for many of Kenexa’s largest global survey projects. Dr. Jolton has over 15 years of extensive consulting experience, which have made him a leading expert in assessment-based organizational change. He has applied his innovative and insightful guidance to number of global businesses ranging from retail giants such as The Home Depot and Gap Inc. to leading financial and professional companies such as Allianz, HSBC, PricewaterhouseCoopers and Wachovia, as well as other global organizations such as DPWN, Textron and Pitney Bowes. As Director of Global Services, Dr. Jolton oversees project teams in all corners of the world including Germany, Hong Kong, Singapore, the United Kingdom and the United States.

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