

Changing behavior

Which comes first, mindset change or behavior change?

I recently presented at a conference of leaders who were wrestling with how to address cyber threats across major corporations. An executive raised his hand and said, “I just have to ask this. Must you change mindset in order to change behavior?”



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This executive’s company had invested in new technology to counter cyber threats, but it also needed employees to act preventatively. Leaders had deployed change management methods hoping to convince employees of the need for new behavior.

“My worry,” the leader said, “is that we educate and communicate and then wait and assume that behavior changes will follow. I can’t wait, and I can’t merely assume. I need widespread behavior change now, and I need to take steps that are certain to drive the right outcome.”

Change flows in different directions

Scholars have debated whether ideas determine actions, or vice versa. Do we eat brown bread because we like it, or do we like it because we eat it? Social psychologists have found that change can flow in either direction, and often does.

Organizations, however, frequently discuss change management or change leadership as if it were primarily about changing mindset — changing how employees think or feel about new behavior and securing their buy-in.

Such a narrow approach can impede progress.

One organization wanted to improve the accuracy of its sales and operations planning process. Leaders spent years creating awareness around the need to synchronize demand, supply and available resources. Yet forecast accuracy only

improved when staff began providing timely and specific feedback to employees about particular, critical behaviors.

Likewise, we often coach executives who have received feedback in the past. They know what they need to change and why. They say they want to change. But they only change when an environment exists that favors the desired behaviors.

More than a mindset

Mindset shifts don’t always lead to new behavior. Individuals might know that texting while driving is dangerous, but they continue to do it anyway.

Conversely, we know it’s possible to behave differently without first changing mindset. I first tried raw sea urchin (uni) because a client ordered it, decidedly not because I was convinced it would taste good.

And we know that behavior that begins as mere compliance can develop over time into a lasting commitment. Uni has actually become one of my favorite dishes.

Mindset change alone (by fostering understanding and buy-in) is sometimes appropriate; for instance, where managers are nearly certain, based on past experience, that what people say they will do corresponds 100 percent with their eventual actions.

Generally, though, it’s best to view mindset change as not necessarily a precondition for behavior change, nor as necessarily sufficient. Sustainable behavior change usually requires that leaders pinpoint and encourage new behaviors needed for the change to be realized.

Whether we seek to guard against cyber threats or simply to eat more brown bread, we know how to progress most quickly — directly encourage people to perform the desired behavior and then, along the way, implement leadership practices that help them want to do it routinely. ●



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