TIMEBACK MANAGEMENT

How do you change lousy work habits?

October 2011 Newsletter

Key Takeaways

- Culture can be changed to encourage more focused, and more productive work habits.
- There are two powerful levers to change a culture: (1) emotional associations, and (2) environmental triggers. Using both levers is essential to effective cultural change.
- You may not be able to change the culture of the whole company, but you can change it in your little corner of the organization. And that's a start.

Dr. Val Curtis, an anthropologist at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, struggled with getting residents of Ghana to wash their hands after going to the bathroom. Diseases and disorders caused by dirty hands—like diarrhea—kill a child somewhere in the world about every 15 seconds, and about half those deaths could be prevented with the regular use of soap, studies indicate. But getting people to adopt this habit is really, really tough.

Dr. Curtis tried a different approach:

Previous health campaigns aimed at convincing Ghanaians to wash their hands after using the bathroom had failed, because mothers often didn't see symptoms like diarrhea as abnormal, but instead viewed them as a normal aspect of childhood. Dr. Curtis needed instead to create a habit wherein people felt a sense of disgust that was cued by the toilet. That disgust would then become a cue for soap.

So her team created commercials that taught viewers to feel a habitual sense of unseemliness surrounding toilet use. The commercials they developed didn't really sell soap use. Rather, they sold disgust. Soap was almost an afterthought. But the message was clear: The toilet cues worries of contamination, and that disgust, in turn, cues soap.

What does her story have to do with your work?

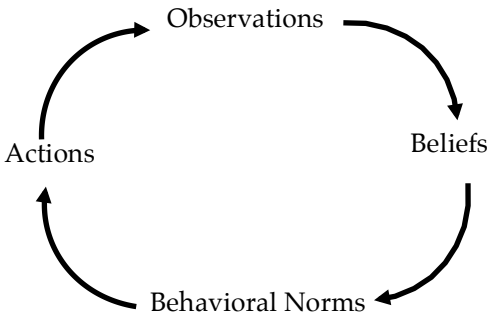
I was thinking about her experiences recently while consulting to a group of R&D engineers at a large firm in Silicon Valley. They complain that they have no time to do their work—they spend six to seven hours per day in meetings or dealing with email, with the result that they have to do their "real" engineering work at night and on weekends.

This kind of complaint fascinates me. What is it about the organizational cultures that keep people from attending to their most important work? Why do they get mired in minutiae that, by their own admission, are irrelevant to their larger goals? And more importantly, how can we change that situation? Telling people to reduce or eliminate meetings, or telling them not to take work home at night won't work.

I think we've got a cultural problem, similar to one afflicting the Ghanaians.

The Roots of Culture

Organizational culture is created from the following cycle:

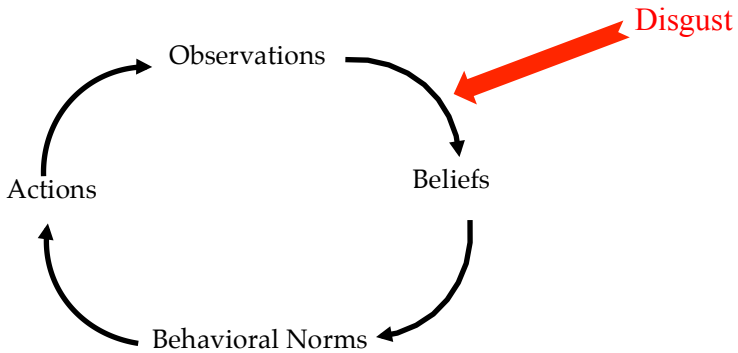


We observe how people around us act. Our interpretation of those observations forms our beliefs. Those beliefs lead to behavioral norms, which lead to the specific actions we take in a given situation. As others go through this cycle beside us, we create our organization's culture. There's nothing mysterious about this: if you see people around you getting praised for working on Sundays, you'll probably start to work on some Sundays, too. And then the organizational culture will become one in which weekend work is prevalent, condoned, and even expected.

In the case of the engineers I mentioned earlier, there's now a well-established culture of spending time in meetings and processing mail during the days and solving engineering problems at night. No matter how much they bemoan the situation, it won't change. Culture beats whining any day.

Injecting Emotional Associations

But by injecting new emotional associations as Dr. Curtis did in Ghana, we can change the culture.



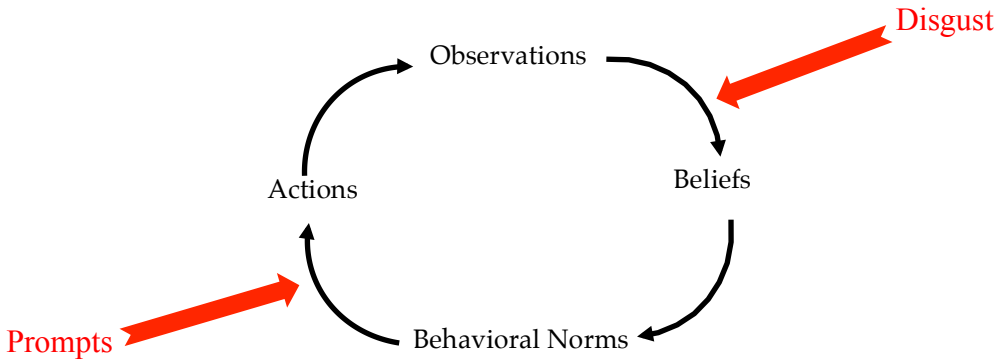
The first—and perhaps most important—step is to see symptoms like spending all day in meetings as "unseemly." From the very top, the message should go out that spending more than, say, four hours per day in meetings is indicative of poor communication protocols and delegation. Working late at night could be made an area for improvement on performance evaluations, rather than an area of praise. There could even be awards and recognition for people who identify ways to eliminate meetings without compromising the ability of teams to coordinate.

Environmental Triggers

We can also create *prompts* for better work habits.

Dr. Wendy Wood, a professor of psychology and neuroscience at Duke, and other researchers have shown that

as much as 45 percent of what we do every day is habitual — that is, performed almost without thinking in the same location or at the same time each day, usually because of subtle cues. For example, the urge to check e-mail or to grab a cookie is likely a habit with a specific prompt. Most cues fall into four broad categories: a specific location or time of day, a certain series of actions, particular moods, or the company of specific people. The e-mail urge, for instance, probably occurs after you've finished reading a document or completed a certain kind of task. The cookie grab probably occurs when you're walking out of the cafeteria, or feeling sluggish or blue.



What if people had a place in their office dedicated solely to managing email? Or if the email program had a bell that rang each 30 minutes, as a reminder of how long they've been working on email? What if people set their Outlook or Lotus Notes to open in Calendar, rather than in their inbox? (Easy to do, by the way. Ask me how.) What if you projected a large countdown timer in conference rooms (as Google does) to keep people focused on how much time is left in a meeting?

These prompts would get people to change their work habits.

It's pretty unlikely that your organization will introduce wholesale changes like this. But it's worth thinking about what you can do for yourself or for your team. How do you make it clear that living in the inbox or in a meeting room isn't the best way to accomplish the team's goals? What kind of new prompts and cues will you develop to help spur your team to adoption of more efficient work habits?