Why Do People Behave the Way They Do?

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During a leadership coaching or consulting relationship, coaches and consultants will often ponder why their clients behave the way they do, and more importantly, coaches or consultant may struggle with how to shape these behaviors to help clients be more successful. It may appear an obvious and easily answered question, but how many of us deeply understand the factors that drive behavior in an individual (or in ourselves for that matter)? What are the elements that can be influenced to help individuals change their behaviors? There are literally thousands of published articles on this topic, making it one of the most researched of topics in psychology (Bechler et al, APS 2021). Despite this, few coaches and consultants that I have worked with have a sound understanding of these elements, how they influence behavior and how they can be influenced.

The model that I have used most often (for example, in a project to limit what is called "Insider threats" in organizations under threat from employees/workers stealing information assets or doing other damage to the company), is the Ajzen and Fishbein Reasoned Action Model (RA). I have used a simplified version of this model with clients to identify the kinds of interventions that are likely to be most effective in influencing employee behavior. I will briefly describe this model and use a business consulting example to demonstrate how it may be used.

The Ajzen & Fishbein Reasoned Action (RA) model
This model is quite complex in its original form and I have simplified here (and in the companies in which I have applied it) to make it more understandable and practical. The logic of the model flows from left to right.

Modified Ajzen & Fishbein RA Model of Factors that Drive Individual Behavior
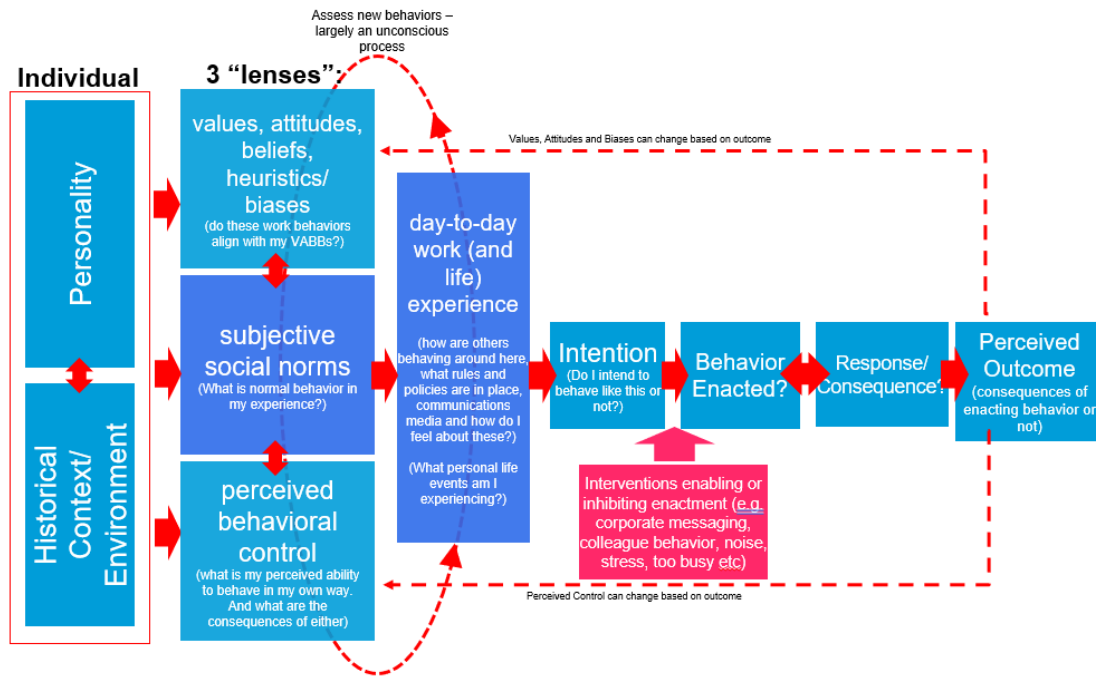
The individual – Personality and historical context and environment

This model is not only a general model for understanding behavior but has been used for predicting consumer purchasing behavior (Waite, 2014) as well as for marketing purposes. Working left to right, the RA model considers an individual coming into an environment (a work environment in this example) with a certain personality type. This personality type, however understood or assessed (or usually not at all), is likely to have an impact in the situation or environment the individual finds themselves in and their response to it. For example, an extrovert may have greater difficulty working in a remote Zoom-type working environment than an introvert. Hiring managers can consider the implications of personality attributes during the recruiting and hiring process to maximize the potential for a "good fit" with the company, the working environment and the role. Managers should also be aware that team members with different personality profiles may respond very differently to remote work conditions and develop mechanisms to overcome challenges.

"3-Lenses" of How we view the world – Values, beliefs and biases, social norms and perceived behavioral control

A lot has been written about biases (especially unconscious biases) in the last decade or so, but the importance of this topic is broader than that. Having some insight into a person's values and beliefs, along with their views about acceptable social norms is vitally important. Again, the interview process during hiring, or during consideration for promotions, should consider these issues when developing questions for the interview process. An example of the impact of these

factors is when I joined a large banking group as manager of their nation-wide customer service function. As a South African at the time, I had spent a decade in the US and had developed the "be yourself" and "speak your mind" belief system common to many in the US – this did not go well in this bank. Moreover, I made the huge mistake of not wearing a suit on my first day (a social norm), which I quickly learned was completely unacceptable. In terms of my "perceived behavioral control", it became abundantly clear that I had no control over these expected norms and behaviors, and I either adapt or leave the organization – I adapted (but with great difficulty). While my anecdote may be somewhat trivial (although it did not seem that way at the time), there are other much more serious examples, such as with "insider threats" (I project I was involved in with a global energy company) where it is not uncommon to find employees who believe that the work content they produce on the job (for example, a software patent) is their own personal property. In many organizations work output of any kind is defined as a company asset and using it in one's personal capacity is considered theft and is potentially prosecutable. In such cases, where there a disconnect between an individual's belief systems and company norms and policies, things can become contentious quickly.

How day-to-day work-life (and personal life) experiences influence behavior
People are "social animals" and are heavily influenced by the behavior of those around them. This is why organizational culture is so critical, because it defines the behaviors observed and mimicked by new employees (especially new employees) in order to fit-in with others and be successful. Leaders are powerful role-models of the behaviors that are appropriate and expected. Continuing with the "insider threat" example, while it may be understood by employees that using material and intellectual property (IP) for their own personal use is against the rules, if a new employee observes others copying material or sending IP to their personal email accounts, it is more likely they will begin to consider these behaviors acceptable.
The belief systems we hold and behaviors we exhibit can be powerfully influenced by the immediate circumstances we experience. For example, a trusted senior leader may behave very differently (relative to beliefs and biases) if he or she is going through a life-crisis, such as a divorce, a death in the family or experiencing financial problems. People can behave out-of-character when under pressure from difficult life events. Leaders (and coaches/consultants) must be aware and sensitive to team members who are experiencing difficult times.

Intentions
Intentions are a function of both beliefs about a specific behavior (for example, I think that having to wear a suit to work is stupid and uncomfortable) and subjective norms toward that behavior (but I see everyone else wearing a suit in my workplace). When I struggle to reconcile this contradiction (I experience cognitive dissonance), my intention is to wear a suit or likely be pushed out of the organization which (at the time) would have been a more damaging outcome. Intentions have been found to predict actual behavior more accurately than other factors – indeed, beliefs are not powerful predictors of behavior, intentions are. This is why market research surveys (and political surveys) often try to determine intentions versus attitudes or beliefs.

Interventions that influence behaviors
Given that intentions are good predictors of behavior, leaders and coaches can use the understanding of a person's intentions to either foster positive behaviors or to intervene before bad behaviors emerge. Here are two examples:

- **Enabling positive behaviors**: In my consulting work with organizations undergoing culture change, I always attempt to coach leaders on how to role-model successful behaviors (this is a very specific, simple 5-step process). However, these new behaviors are often uncomfortable, and even somewhat embarrassing, for leaders and others to demonstrate to their teams – their feedback to me is that it feels like play-acting. Yes indeed, it is play-acting until the behavior becomes the norm. But it is essential that senior leaders overtly (at least initially) role-model these behaviors to enable others to feel comfortable doing so. For example, in one of my clients, "agile and quick decision-making" was a behavior that they had defined as important to strategy execution. Many team members said (in surveys as well as in person) that their intention was to enact quicker decision-making, but because they did not observe their leadership doing so they felt uncomfortable doing so. Once I was able to coach senior leaders on how to go about role-modeling these behaviors, the intentions of the team to mimic these behaviors happened rapidly.
- **Intervene before bad behaviors**: Again, using the "insider threat" case, our investigation found that employees with the intention to steal information assets, would do so when they thought it was safe, for example after hours when others had left work for the day. At this time, copying documents on a copy machine, or onto a thumb-drive was more common. The interventions we put in place were quite simple, for example messaging at copy machines (both posters as well as electronic messages) reminding people that copying for personal use was against the rules, and also that it was likely they would be identified (through monitoring technologies).

Enacted behaviors

Behaviors are observable events. In the RA model above, based on "intentions", the individual either enacts the behavior or does not (for example, certain factors such as the "insider threat" messaging I described, was intended to intervene bad behavior). Fishbein and Ajzen describe behaviors as having four dimensions: the action performed, the target at which the action is directed, the context in which it is conducted and the time at which it is performed. Behaviors are observable, whereas attitudes and beliefs are not. The red-dotted arrows in the model above, are important concepts to understand and consider in encouraging and fostering new behaviors. This is discussed below.

Response/consequence

Given that behaviors are generally easy to observe, both positive and negative behaviors require consequences if they are to be reinforced or inhibited. The topic of reward, recognition and punishment is a large topic in its own right, and I won't attempt to summarize it here. However, it is important to emphasize that leaders and coaches should focus a lot of attention on the consequences (positive or negative) that foster or inhibit behaviors.

Perceived outcome

If an employee has an intention to behave in a certain way, and actually does so, their perception of the outcome of the behavior will greatly influence whether they repeat the behavior or not. In my example of "insider threats", if an employee perceives they have been successful in copying valuable information assets, they are much more likely to repeat that behavior. Similarly in my example of culture change, where employees were expected to make "agile and quick decisions", if the perceived outcome of doing so was positive, they were much more likely to accelerate that behavior. The perceived outcome is also influenced by the following factor "Response/Consequence".

Feedback loops (the red-dotted arrowed lines in the RA model)
What is not apparent in Ajzen & Fishbein's RA model is the <u>reverse</u> impact that a person's enacted behaviors can have on their beliefs and attitudes. Aronson identifies this phenomenon as follows:

"What social psychologists have long known, but have only recently begun to understand, is that changes in behavior (even when forced) can affect changes in attitude".

Aronson uses examples of prejudice in the United States and South Africa to describe the situation where a person's behavior is encouraged, or forced to change (for example, by expectation in an organization, legislation in a country or other environmental factors) and the cognitive dissonance this causes (in other words, the individual is forced to behave in a manner that is not aligned with his or her entrenched beliefs and attitudes), can have a reverse influence on one's attitudes and beliefs over time. Aronson describes this as the "saying (and doing) is believing" principle – In other words, being encouraged or force to behave in a certain fashion over time, can ultimately shape an individual's beliefs. This circumstance is maximized if the new behaviors produce positive experiences. While this reverse effect is not represented in Fishbein and Ajzen's RA model, I have represented this effect by the adding the reverse red-dotted arrows in the RA model above. I believe this is an important addition to the model and forms a cornerstone of the logic for changing behaviors in organizations and in society.

End note
Coaches, consultants and leaders should become familiar with one or more of the behavior models such as the RA model described here. This allows for more specific, targeted interventions to assist clients to better understand their own behavior and to be more specific in techniques to shape more appropriate behaviors in the future.