

Which First -- Attitude or Behavior?

It's fitting that my first contribution in the new "Attitude and Behavior" column addresses the age-old question, which comes first -- attitude or behavior? Actually, the more practical question is which should be targeted for change first -- attitude or behavior? Education typically addresses "attitude" or internal and subjective dimensions of people by attempting to "think people into acting differently." In other words, educators present theory, principles, and rationale in an attempt to influence inside aspects of people -- their intention, belief, perception, or attitude.

Training programs focus on behavior. Through role-play exercises and behavioral feedback, people practice desired target behaviors. Thus, this approach to change attempts to "act people into thinking differently." It's presumed that if people act in a certain way on the outside, they will adjust their "inside" (including intention, belief, perception, and attitude) to be *consistent* with their behaviors.

The key word is "consistency." The truth of the matter is that both approaches (education and training) work because of our need to be consistent. Thus, it doesn't matter whether you address attitude or behavior first *if* you are successful at influencing your target. I recommend targeting behavior first because behavior is easier to change on a large scale than attitude. In fact, psychologists know more about changing behavior than attitude because behavior is easier to measure objectively and reliably than attitude. Therefore, various intervention procedures to influence behaviors in organizational settings have been developed and refined through empirical research.

Sometimes the starting behavior can be simply a verbal statement or commitment, and then more desired behavior (and attitude) can be expected because of the consistency principle.

Let's examine the consistency principle in more depth, and see how this principle works to influence behavior and attitude. Indeed, three change techniques described below follow directly from this principle.

The Consistency Principle

Many psychologists consider the consistency principle a weapon of influence lying deep within us and directing our actions. It reflects our motivation to be (and appear) consistent. Simply put, when we make a choice or take a stand, we encounter personal and social pressures to perform consistently with our commitment. We obtain this pressure to be consistent from three basic sources: a) society values consistency within people, b) consistent conduct is beneficial to daily existence, and c) a consistent orientation allows for shortcuts in information processing and decision making. Instead of considering all relevant information in a certain situation, a person need only remember their commitment or decision and respond consistently.

Public and Voluntary Commitment

When people sign their name to a petition or pledge card they are making a commitment to behave in a certain way. Later, they behave in this way to be consistent with their commitment. Safety professionals can use this variation of the consistency principle to increase safety-related behavior. After a discussion about a particular work procedure, for example, the audience could be asked to make a commitment to perform the desired behavior. What kind of commitment should be requested?

Commitments are most effective (or influential) when they are public, effortful, and perceived as voluntary or not coerced. Thus, it would be more beneficial to have employees make a public rather than private commitment to perform a certain safe behavior. And, it would be better to have them sign their name to a card or public declaration display than to merely raise

their hands. In addition, it is very important for those pledging to follow a certain work practice to believe they made the commitment voluntarily. The reality might be that decisions to make a public commitment are dramatically influenced by external factors like peer pressure. However, if people write an internal script that they made a personal choice, consistency is most likely to follow the commitment. Thus, the promoter of a commitment strategy needs to realize the influence of personal choice and make statements that allow participants to believe the commitment is not coerced and is completely up to them. I discussed the pledge-card technique in earlier *ISHN* articles (May, 1994 and July, 1995).

Foot-in-the-Door; Start Small and Build

This influence strategy also follows directly from the consistency principle. To be consistent, a person who follows a small request is likely to comply with a larger request later. Thus, after agreeing to serve on a “safety steering committee,” an individual is more willing to give a safety presentation at a plantwide safety and health meeting. Research has found this commitment strategy to be successful in boosting product sales, monetary contributions to charities, and blood donations.

The pledge-card commitment technique referred to above uses this principle. More specifically, after people sign a pledge card that commits them to perform a certain behavior for a specified period of time (such as “Buckle vehicle safety belts for one month,” “Use particular personal protective equipment for two months,” “Walk behind yellow lines for the rest of the year”), they are more likely to actually do the safe behavior.

The “foot-in-the-door” technique only works to increase safe behaviors when people comply with the initial small request. In fact, if a person says “No” to the first request, this individual might find it even easier to refuse a subsequent, more important request. Thus, if the

circumstances suggest a “No” to your request, you didn’t start small enough. In this case, you should be prepared to retreat to a less demanding request. I wrote more on this technique in a July, 1995 *ISHN* article.

Low-balling: Raise the Stakes Later

This technique of “throwing a low ball” occurs when a person is persuaded to make a decision or commitment (for example, to serve on the safety steering committee) because of the relatively low stakes associated with the decision (the monthly safety meetings will not require too much time and effort). Then, when the individual gets committed to the decision (attends the first two safety meetings), the stakes are raised (more meetings are requested for a special safety effort). Because of the consistency principle, the individual will likely stick with the original (remain an active member of the committee).

Almost 20 years ago researchers first demonstrated the powerful influence of this technique when attempting to get college students to sign-up for an early 7:00 a.m. experiment on “thinking processes.” During the solicitation phone calls, the 7:00 a.m. start time was mentioned up-front for half the subjects. Only 24 percent of these individuals agreed to participate. For the other subjects, the caller first asked if they wanted to participate in the study. Then, after 56 percent agreed, the caller threw them the “low ball” and said the experiment started at 7:00 a.m. The caller gave subjects a chance to change their minds, but none did. Furthermore, 95 percent of these individuals actually showed up at the 7:00 a.m. appointment time. After making an initial commitment to participate, practically all of the subjects showed consistency and kept their commitment -- in spite of the “low ball.”

This procedure is similar to the “foot-in-the-door” technique in that a larger request occurs after the target person agrees with a smaller request. A key difference, however, is that

there is only one basic decision in the low-balling procedure, with the costs or stakes raised after initial commitment. This compliance tactic is common among car dealers. Once a customer has agreed to purchase a car at a special price (for example, \$800 below all other competitors), the price is raised for a number of reasons. The salesperson's boss might have refused to approve the deal, certain options had not been included in the special price, or the dealership manager may have decreased the value of the customer's trade-in. Customers who have agreed to the special price will usually not change their minds with a price increase (a "low ball"), because renegeing on a purchase decision may suggest a lack of consistency or indicate failure to fulfill an obligation (even though the obligation is only imaginary). Often customers will develop a set of new reasons to justify their initial choice and the additional costs.

Don't Stifle Trust

The low-balling strategy raises a critical issue with regard to using certain techniques to increase safe behavior. Even though low-balling is used rather frequently to increase compliance, how would you feel about change agents (people who use the technique) if you knew they used the procedure intentionally to get more money, commitment or safe behavior from you? For example, do you trust the waiter who brings you an expensive wine list only after you've been seated and made selections from the food menu? Your answer probably depends on whether you believe this sequence of events was done intentionally to get you to buy more.

Similarly, you might not dislike or mistrust the car salesman who adds cost to a vehicle's advertised purchase price unless you are suspicious that the price differential was fabricated deliberately to increase revenue. In other words, our trust, appreciation, or respect for people might decrease considerably if we believe they intentionally used a particular influence technique to trick or deceive us into modifying our attitude or behavior. Of course, there may be

no harm done if the result is clearly for our own good (as for our health or safety) *and* we realize this.

In Conclusion

Thus, because of the consistency principle it doesn't matter whether attitude or behavior changes first. The issue is whether a technique is available to influence one or the other. The three techniques discussed here were introduced as targeting behavior. However, it could be argued that internal (attitudinal) dimensions were intertwined throughout each technique. For maximum influence, for example, the pledge-card procedure requires the person to believe (internally) that the commitment was voluntary. Following successive compliance with escalating demands, internal commitment is developed, until eventually an "attitude" results. And, the low-balling technique depends on the target individual developing an internal justification for the initial decision, which then strengthens commitment and leads to behavior following the "low ball." Consequently, the key lesson is that people attempt to keep their internal dimensions (like attitude) and external actions (behavior) consistent. Thus, whether attitude or behavior is influenced first, if the person does not feel coerced, the other will likely follow.

E. Scott Geller, Ph.D.
Professor
Virginia Tech

Note: Dr. Geller will be teaching these and other influence techniques for safety at three two-day seminars in 1996. Contact Safety Performance Solutions at (540) 951-7233 for more information.