Changing habits:
Time & place matter most!

■ BY GAUTAM BRAHMA

Last month, we explored the challenges involved in changing habits.

People are more likely to be open to change of habit around temporal landmarks such as first day of a week, first day of a month, first day of a New Year or first day after a long break from work or study. The willingness to change is sharper around personal temporal landmarks such as birthdays and anniversaries. Also, the persistence with new desirable behaviour is greater if a commitment has been made before others and involves a loss of money on breach. The last bit is important since loss aversion is a stronger drive for most people as compared to gain seeking. The persistence with efforts to change is stronger if people change their surroundings. Finally, the continued efforts to make the changes are more likely if the desired result is in line with deep aspirations unique to the individual. These are findings from interesting empirical research by J. Riis of Harvard Business School and H. Dai & K.L. Milkman of University of Pennsylvania.

The implications of each of these findings are very interesting for organizations, since all organizations have an interest in developing desirable behaviour in all or select employees. Firstly, behaviour change is more likely if an effort is made to ascertain deeply held employee beliefs and aspirations and then position the new behaviour as something that is in line with those unique elements. For instance, punctuality may be better 'sold' to some as something that makes them more useful to their fellow workers, while for others it may be attractive as something which makes them appear more obedient to their supervisors. To others, it may be best positioned as something that increases their leisure time in the evening as they can finish work on time.

Secondly, behaviour changes are likely to be more successful if they are invoked at appropriate temporal milestones which individuals use to compartmentalize their life, such as birthdays, anniversaries, birthday of first child, completion of another year at work, or even Mondays. Thirdly, the desired changes are more likely if the employee can be persuaded to commit to them in the presence of others, especially those who personally matter. Creating that group setting is then the key

supervisory skill. While the research is somewhat silent on the choice of interaction that works best, it could well be that a face-to-face group meeting where commitments are given might work better than similar commitments sought and given over email with copies to relevant others. The public commitments in recovery groups like Alcoholics Anonymous are an

extreme case in point.

Thirdly, people in the process of making changes in their work habits would benefit greatly from a change in their physical surroundings which will complement the temporal milestone as the start of a new period in their lives. People mentally delink and discount undesirable behaviour done in previous such periods in their lives, and are therefore less burdened by the enormity of the change required. This resetting could be a change of city, building, floor or even a relocation of their work desk. This could also result in the elimination of cues that triggered the inappropriate behaviour in the first place, and that would be icing on the cake.

Fourthly, learning relating to loss aversion is harder to apply in the workplace. The study found that people who put some money aside which was diminished, involuntarily, each time they relapsed to the old undesirable habit, were more likely to make an enduring change. While managers cannot obviously get their people to put money aside, they can innovate around the concept and come up with something equivalent that works. How about letting assembly floor workers see the amount they stand to earn from target production each week and then see the amount diminish each day as their performance takes them away from that target?

The key learning is that changing people involves knowing a lot more about them as individuals. Managers who make that effort have a better chance of succeeding. Managers who treat all employees as carbon copies of each other and use vanilla initiatives to inculcate desirable work habits are less likely to be successful. Luckily information technology is constantly reducing the effort required to extract and leverage employee data and craft and time employee-specific approaches to performance improvement. It is up to managers to study the research findings, get convinced themselves and then check how deeply they really want the desired changes to happen. At an intuitive level, lay people have long been using some of these approaches. For instance, one can see the popular media references to 'relocation therapy', which links the change of surroundings to better attitudes and better relationships and even to better response to cancer treatment.

Managers may like to seize the opportunities that present themselves every day for one employee or another. While a global temporal milestone like New Year's Eve has passed, individual temporal milestones present themselves every day. Or, at least every Monday! (HC)

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