

Attitudes Drive Behavior

Okay, quick review.

First, influence occurs when a source deliberately tries to change a receiver. Second, persuasion occurs when a source deliberately uses communication to change a receiver's attitude. Third, an attitude is a person's evaluation of an object of thought.

What's the big deal with "attitudes?" I mean, why even define the thing and study it? The answer as we'll develop is simple as ABC.

AN ANSWER OR TWO

I can think of two reasons why we should sometimes focus on changing attitudes. First, sometimes we can't directly influence behavior and we have to find a proxy or indirect agent. Second, attitudes play a major role in determining behavior. Let's consider each of these ideas.

Free Will or You Can't Make Me.

The most direct way to change somebody is influence. Change behavior, right? Behavior is the real deal, the main point, the focus, so why diddle around with things like attitude. Well, a lot of the time, you don't have control over other people's actual behavior. People do have free choice and pretty much do as they please. And we can't make them do what we want by merely stomping our foot or asking pretty please with sugar on top.

Furthermore, there might be times when we do have very direct control over someone's behavior ("I vatching you!"), but the influence lasts only as long as we maintain that control. As soon as we exit the scene, our controlled receivers will revert to prior form and do pretty much as they please. Argh. Therefore, if you cannot directly control another person's behavior, then you have to find a better way for getting that behavior.

Attitudes Drive Behavior or Maybe I Can Make You.

Believe it or not one of the best ways to change other people's behavior is to change their attitudes about the object in question. As we'll develop in this primer and in class, attitudes often drive behavior. If we can change attitudes then we are in position to influence other people's behavior.

This is truly cool beans. We can still obtain the behavior we want from others but if that behavior is now driven by attitude rather than control, our lives are much easier. Most obviously, we don't have to be in the room "vatching" the receivers to make sure they produced the desired behavior. They'll do that themselves because their attitude is favorable toward that behavior. Yippy-skippy, we've discovered a secret: Attitudes drive behavior.

So, all we gotta do is figure out how to change attitudes and we're off to the races, sitting there at the track with all those other cool change agents like the folks who invented the Thigh Master (and made over ten million bucks on a big plastic clothespin that has about as much impact on your fitness and appearance as wishful thinking does). But wait, put that mint julep down, and think a moment.

There are times when people do not behave consistently with their attitudes. The best (or worst) example of this concerns risky behaviors. Everyone at some point in their lives has performed some stupid, dangerous, or malicious behavior even they knew at the time that the action was stupid, dangerous, or malicious. Just think about peer group pressure. Simply because your buddies were doing "it" or urging you to try "it," not because you had a positive attitude toward the action, you did the risky behavior.

So we got a two part problem here. First, we gotta figure out how to change the attitude. Second, we gotta figure out how to make people use that attitude. This is important. You must see the two steps or else you'll probably fail at persuasion. First get the attitude change. Second, get the attitude to drive behavior.

Making Attitudes Drive Behavior

Now, most of this primer and the course will help with the first problem. There are a lot of different ways to get attitude change. The rest of this chapter will focus on the second problem. How do you get attitudes to drive behavior? I've got the answer.

The Conceptual Model of Attitude-Behavior Consistency: The ABCs.

To create our conceptual model, I'm going to integrate the thinking of two different researchers. Russ Fazio and Mark Snyder have made a strong case that certain conditions improve the likelihood that people will show attitude-behavior consistency. And, if these conditions are not met, then Fazio and Snyder predict attitudes will not drive behavior. Here's the thinking.

The conceptual model of the ABCs says that two factors make attitude drive behaviors: Attitude availability and attitude relevance. These factors are straightforward and obvious. If a given attitude is available (or accessible or active or operative or vigorous or supply your own synonym here), then it is more likely to drive behavior. If a given attitude is relevant (or useful or applicable or pertinent or SYOSH), then it is more likely to drive behavior. Let's dig on availability and relevance.

An attitude is available when you can think of it, when you know that you've got an attitude on this topic, and when that attitude is "turned on." The best illustration of this concerns the "priming" paradigm. Priming is essentially a setup activity where you do something that gets a person fired up or poised to think about something. Consider this example.

If I want you to have a bad attitude about your dating partner's attractiveness, I will prime you by having you look at pictures of very sexy models first. If I want you to have a good attitude toward your partner's attractiveness, I'll prime you by having you look at pictures of relatively ugly models first. The priming task (viewing pictures of models) activates your attitudes about "attractiveness." Then when I ask you to make a judgment about your partner, those primed attitudes will be available to guide your behavior (and drive how you rate your partner).

See the implication? To produce the correct ABCs (attitude-behavior consistency), make sure the attitude is available.

Now what was the second factor? Yeah, right. Relevance.

An attitude is relevant when it applies to the situation at hand. When you're sitting in Mountaineer Field and the crowd is cheering for the home team, your attitudes about this persuasion course will have no impact on whether you join in with the cheer. That attitude and that situation is not relevant. However, when you're in class and you observe other people joining in the class discussion, your attitudes toward the class should determine your communication behavior. (And you'll join right in, huh?)

Another obvious implication. Attitudes will drive behavior when the attitude is relevant in the situation.

Availability and relevance seem so obvious and simple that no one should even have to say this out loud. Of course attitudes will not drive behavior when you aren't aware of your attitude (not available) or you're aware, but the attitude isn't useful (not relevant). Duh.

Well, they are obvious now that we've thought about it, but most people in the real world overlook this simple conceptual model. Most people most of the time think all they have to do is produce the attitude change and then forever onward the receiver will show the desired, attitude-driven behavior. It just ain't so. The real world is littered with instances where people do not show the ABCs.

Okay, on a fairly abstract and general level we have a solution to our two part problem. To insure that the attitude change we created actually drives behavior we must also insure that the attitude is available and relevant when we want the behavior.

An Application

Let's construct a real world application of the ABC Model. We've already done some heavy lifting and created attitude change in a receiver. Now we want to make sure that our hard won attitude change actually leads to behavior change. What do we do? Consider this example.

Melanie used to like a high fat diet, but I worked on her with a bunch of powerful persuasion tactics that now produce in her a negative attitude about a high fat diet. How can I make sure her new attitude shows in a new behavior?

As we get out of the car in the parking lot at the grocery store I ask her if she saw that story on CNN about the new low fat substitute that the FDA has just approved. I make it sound natural and conversational so it's no big deal. I get her to talk about the story. If she saw it, great. If not, I can tell her a little about it. Either way, I've activated the attitude and it is now available. And since I'm having this conversation as we're enter the grocery store, the attitude is clearly relevant because she's getting ready to buy food.

And if the ABC Model is correct, then all I have to do from here on out is keep my mouth shut and let her attitude guide her behavior. And when she moves through the store, she will automatically be thinking about the fat content of the food she's buying.

An Implication

This discussion of the ABCs has one very practical implication. Mere attitude change is not sufficient to guarantee the behavior change we desire. We must take an additional step in the real world to obtain the attitude-behavior consistency we seek. We must make sure that the attitude is both available and relevant in a given situation. When these two conditions apply, we'll get our ABCs quite nicely.

RECOMMENDED READINGS AND REFERENCES

Fazio, R., (1990). Multiple processes by which attitudes guide behavior: The MODE model as an integrative framework. In M. Zanna (Ed.) *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol 23, (pp. 75-109). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

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[Back to Table of Contents](#)

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