THE STATE OF BEHAVIOR CHANGE IN THE PURPOSE-LED SECTOR: NAVIGATING CHALLENGES AND UNLOCKING POTENTIAL.

August 2024

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This report is intended to help those in the purpose-led sector with an interest in changing behaviour.

The challenges described here were common across organisations of very different sizes, missions and methods.

So if they resonate with you:

firstly, be reassured you are not alone!

and secondly, know that we'd be delighted to talk to you about your own challenges, and how we can help you overcome them with our **Four Foundations approach.**

WE DON'T USE THE TERM BEHAVIOUR CHANGE BUT FUNDAMENTALLY IT'S THE PREMISE OF EVERYTHING WE DO

Rebecca Day, CEO and Founder
She's Electric

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Foreword

Sometimes the best things happen because of serendipity.

Earlier this year, I reconnected with Steve Brunt at a workshop for social venture Climate Habits. Steve and I were strategic consultants at COI which used to be the government's marketing agency. It was a time when Behaviour Change methodology was first being developed with the Cabinet Office creating the MINDSPACE model and Cass Sustain and Richard Thaler, publishing Nudge, Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness. .

We were curious. Is the latest thinking of Behaviour Change relevant to the Purpose Led Sector? How is it different and can we create principles and a model that can unlock the better outcome and ultimately impact?

So we reached and spoke to 24 wise individuals from social ventures to large charities all dedicated to improve society. Purposes ranged from ending homelessness and building healthy financial habits to supporting people experiencing bereavement.

What stood out is the critical nature of behaviour change (even if people don't use that term), the different purposes of behaviour change and the blockers to delivering effective change.

But very few pursue a "Behaviour Change" approach to achieving those goals, and one organisation had actively decided against using it.

We think that there is an opportunity for transformation change and wanted to share our thinking and offer our help. We could only summarise what we heard in this report, contact janine@jumpinpuddles.co.uk to find out more.

Janine Chandler, Founder,
Jump in Puddles, Consultancy

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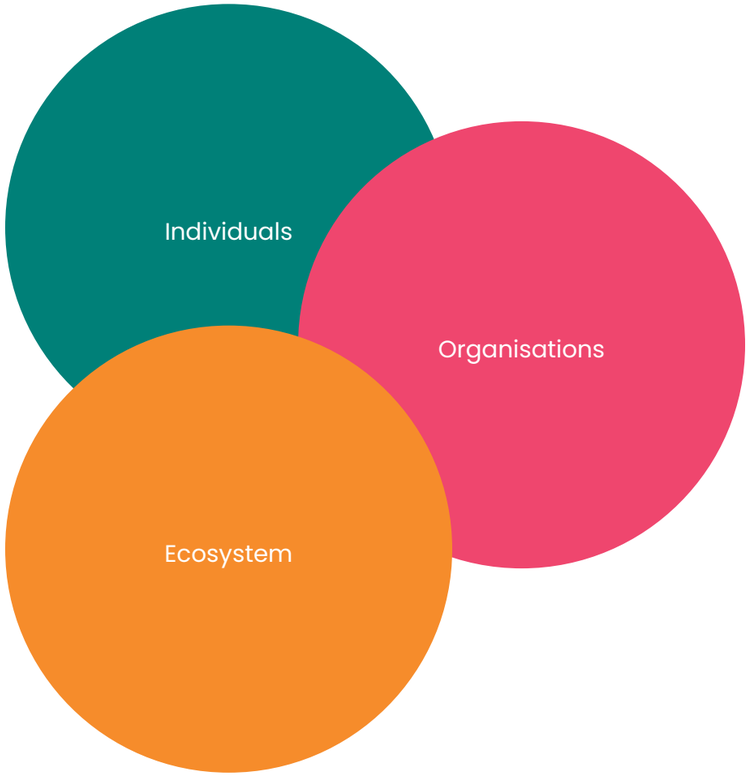
What do we mean behaviour change

Behaviour change is an approach to achieving an organisation's objectives by changing what people DO – as opposed to what they know, believe, feel, or think.

Behaviour change can include interventions with individuals, groups, communities and/or whole populations. Approaches are built on evidence from multiple disciplines including behavioural science, social marketing and psychology. It has been applied to influence behaviours related to: health, safety, education, the environment, crime and community relations, as well as for commercial and profit-led purposes.

A key principle of behaviour change is recognising how and why the audience do what they do now, as well why they don't do as desired.



Why does it matter?

Societally, we are facing an array of challenges that cannot be met without substantial, widespread and sustained shifts in behaviour. Change is needed among the population at large, and within businesses and institutions such as schools, local authorities and the NHS. The consequences of inaction will be particularly serious for marginalised groups, who are impacted most negatively by pollution, poor diet and health, crime and economic insecurity.

From tackling obesity, to mitigating the impact of artificial intelligence, to achieving net zero, continuing to do what we do now has ceased to be a viable option.

But continuing to do what we do now is precisely human nature.

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What we heard about behaviour change in the purpose led sector

It's critical to what they do

Almost all our respondents see changing behaviour as vital to their organisations mission. For some, helping individuals achieve positive changes in their lives is the mission. For others, the change required was within their organisation itself. And for others, the goal was much broader, aimed at achieving change at the level of wider culture or the eco-system of their sector.

But very few pursue a "Behaviour Change" approach to achieving those goals, even if only one organisation had actively decided against using it.

But it's not always working effectively

There are several key reasons behaviour change is not part of the operating models of the organisations we spoke with.

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Why purpose led organisations find it hard to embrace Behaviour Change

It can seem complex, the domain of experts.

On the surface, behaviour change may sound appealing. But on investigation, layer upon layer of academic complexity is revealed, with models and frameworks and demands of rigour that the layperson can't possibly implement alone, and can't afford to build or hire a team of experts to do for them.

The fact that the discipline has been so extensively researched and systematised - with models like COM-B and the Behaviour Change Wheel dominating perceptions - conversely makes it much harder to envisage applying to one's own challenges.

This is ironic, because this is exactly the sort of hard-to-adopt behaviour the entire field recommends against!

The organisations we spoke to are looking for practical and impactful solutions, and often need them to be employed by whole groups of non-experts, be they volunteers, front-line workers or managers.

Or it can seem overly simplistic

On the other hand, approaches built around behavioural science, especially 'nudge theory', can come across as too simplistic or glib for the types of complex situations our organisations are dealing with. Nudges after all, are very effective for one-off, low attention actions, and can even be applied to changing habits, but aren't by any means appropriate or effective in all contexts.

The term has developed negative connotations

'Behaviour Change' has come to sound paternalistic and externally imposed. A thing 'being done to' the audience, rather than with or by them.

That would clash with the ethos of most of the organisations we spoke to, who are looking for solutions that are empathetic and empower their target audiences. This is especially true for those working with marginalised groups, including some for whom overcoming this type of perception is already a major challenge for their organisation.

It doesn't fit their standard way of working

Organisations have created a delivery model - it could be running training or events - that is stable and works for them. On a day-to-day basis, no-one is questioning the validity or efficiency of that model. Even if they did, change is risk.

This is habitual behaviour in action at the organisational level. We do what we've done before automatically, unless something forces change on us.

It's not what the funding model demands

Besides, most organisations have to carefully balance what they can do with what they secure funding to do. That can often mean fitting with the requirements of grant-givers, or delivering measurable results determined by the commissioners of the service. Frequently measures short-term outputs is easier and more in line with expectation than measuring longer-term outcomes.

One organisation that has built their service around a rigorous behaviour change approach has found it very difficult to secure funding customers, because the level of rigour is too much for them! Perhaps it would put other parallel initiatives in a difficult light.

The result

The consequence of all this is that despite most acknowledging that changing behaviour is critical to their purpose, behaviour change as an approach is not gaining traction in purpose-led organisations.

But more importantly, with the focus on output metrics instead of outcomes, the desired changes in behaviour themselves are almost certainly not happening, and some respondents despair of the potential to affect the change they want to see.

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Four key lessons we drew from our conversations

Understand the incentives

Human behaviour is messy. Untangling one aspect of behaviour from another is never easy, and sometimes has unintended consequences.

We always have to take the time to understand the context of a behaviour before we try to change it. Change is always harder than staying the same. How can we make our change easier or more motivating in context?

Go with the flow

Finding the positives in existing behaviour and building on them is almost always easier and more productive than trying to achieve wholesale change. Stigmatising, criticising or dismissing how things are being done can cause resistance and rejection.

Focus where you can feel the impact

Many of our respondents were worried that they couldn't measure the long term impact of what they were doing, but few doubted their work was delivering in the shorter term. And that's OK. Feeling the positive impact of what you're doing is the best way to keep a behaviour going.

While short-termism can be a problem, it can also be disheartening to work with so long a horizon that you can't feel the impact of what you're doing. Furthermore, you can't control external forces, or solve the complexity of a system. You just have to know you have a part to play, and partners to play with.

See the change you want to be

True change relies on human connections. - personal understanding, empathy, role models to believe in and paths to follow.

Often organisations struggle if they don't reflect the communities they serve. Lived experience usually gets more traction than subject matter expertise. People need to see and hear from someone they sense is like them, or takes the time to truly understand them.

WE GET PEOPLE TO CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE - OUT. YOU DON'T IMPOSE CHANGE, YOU DON'T CHANGE PEOPLE BY IMPOSING ROLES OR SAYING THESE ARE OUR VALUES

Flavia Gapper -
Director of Help, Advice and Services
- Charity of Civil Servants

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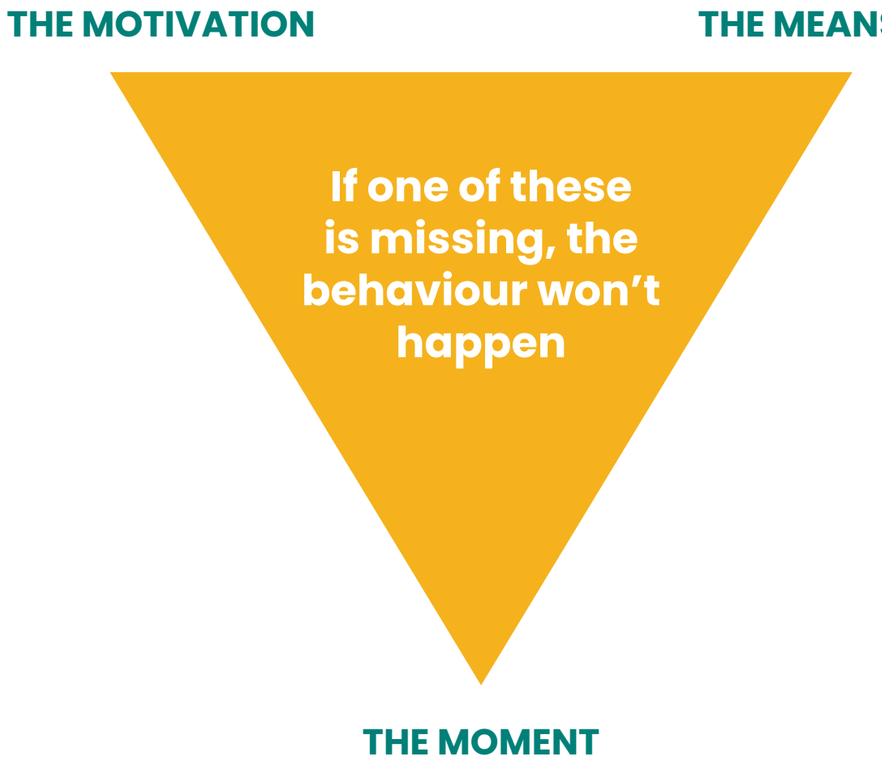
The golden triangle - Motivation, Means, Moment



The three factors needed for any behaviour to happen.

THE MOTIVATION
You have to need or want something enough.

THE MEANS
You have to have the means - money, time, effort - required to do it.

If you want something enough, you'll find the means. If something's easy enough, you don't need much motivation.

Lastly,

THE MOMENT
Why it matters right now. Our brains are busy with what's in front of them. In the absence of a cue or trigger, the behaviour won't happen.

Like the fire triangle of fuel, air and heat, if we change or remove one of these, we can affect or stop the behaviour.

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What drives behaviour, and why is it so hard to change?

Behaviour is mostly habitual

90% of our behaviour is habit. 45% of what we do every day is the same as every other day. Most of the time, we do what we do most of the time.

We'd actually go crazy if this wasn't the case. We need to work mostly on autopilot, to free up mental capacity for the vast flow of new information streaming at us every second.

Habits arise by repetition of a real-world pattern: a situation, a response, a result. A cue, an action, a reward. Habits can lie dormant, always there, waiting for their trigger.

Habits versus Goals

But there is another key determinant of behaviour: our goals. What we are trying to achieve. At a high level, goals steer us through life. Having goals is very motivating, and achieving them is very rewarding. In focus, they can provide enough motivation to override our instinctive habits. But goals, unlike habits, exist mostly in the mind. They're intangible, inconstant, and require attention.

Behaviour is shaped by these two (often competing) systems - habits and goals. What we do, and what we want. 'Do' is mostly more powerful than 'want', because the system is automatic and 'always on', whereas 'want' is on stand-by until consciously activated.

Changing a behaviour, especially an ingrained behaviour, can be hugely challenging. Because even if someone knows they need to change, and wants to change - and even if they say they're going to change - it doesn't mean they will. Their behaviour is powerfully shaped by what's happening in the moment, and their mind's automatic responses to it.

This is why much of the attention (and money) dedicated to "awareness raising" doesn't pay back. Knowledge - and even good intentions - don't lead to action.

Behaviour flows.

It follows a path of least resistance, guided by one's own past behaviour, other people's behaviour, and in the absence of those, what seems easiest in the moment. We keep doing what we've done before, unless something diverts us. And that's behaviour change's job.

We have to design interventions that wherever possible, go with the flow. Building on positive aspects of existing behaviour, while lowering barriers to the new behaviour, and raising barriers to the old behaviour.

If you want to change a behaviour, you have to understand how and why people do what they do now, why they don't do what we'd like them to do, and where in their actions there might be susceptibility to change.

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Where to start – Four Foundations for achieving change

THEORY OF CHANGE

WHY you do what you do.

A systematic approach to connect your activities with the desired outcomes. The theory of change helps close the gap between your actions and your goals.

LEVERS OF CHANGE

WHAT you can use to achieve the desired change

A model for analysing what drives the target behaviour to identify the opportunities for influence, and focus where our audience will be most open to change.

AGENTS OF CHANGE

WHO needs to be part of the solution

An approach to identifying whom we need on our side. We're social creatures, and the actions of those around us are a huge influence on any behaviour.

PROGRAMME OF CHANGE

HOW to turn theory and plans into action

How to turn these insights into achievable changes you can embed it in the day to day workings of your organisation, including test-and-learn techniques.

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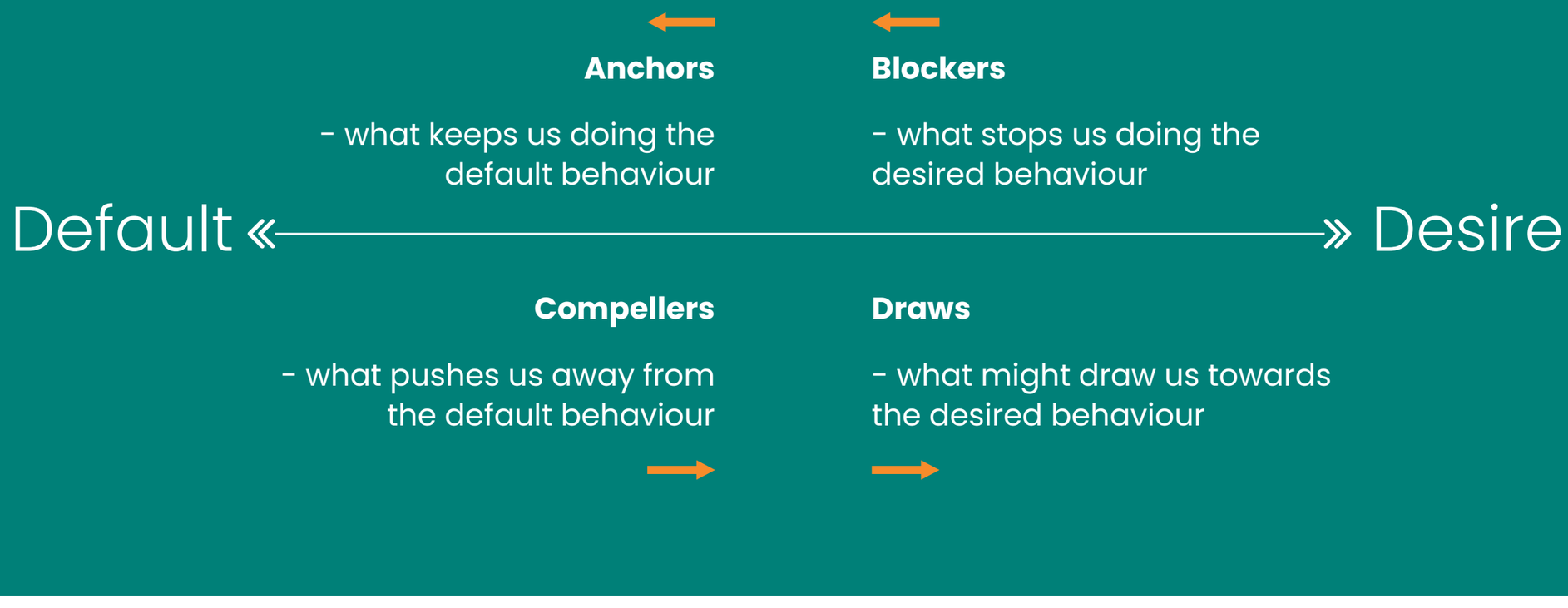
The levers of change - the ABCD model

Behaviour Change seeks to identify the Push and Pull factors between Default and Desired behaviours.



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WE ARE HERE TO END HOMELESSNESS BY CHANGING A DYSFUNCTIONAL SYSTEM. WE DO THAT IN TWO WAYS. ONE IS SUPPORTING PEOPLE TO END THEIR HOMELESSNESS, AND CHANGING THE ECOSYSTEM

Juliet Mountford, Director of Client Services, Crisis

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Want to unlock the potential of behaviour change in your organisation?

A great place to start is an exploratory Four Foundations half day workshop with Janine and Steve.

Contact

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