



Fiona ROBERTSON

Norm Matching - why it seduces us more than we think

I'm about halfway through James Clear's book *Atomic Habits*. It's one of the best books I've ever read. It's about how to build good habits and break bad ones, and if you're looking to do that in your life, I strongly recommend you go and buy a copy - but that's not what this article is about. This article is about the incredible strength of norm matching and why it matters for organisational culture and business performance.

In his book, James cites a fascinating series of experiments that were conducted by a psychologist called Solomon Asch in the 1950s. The person who was the subject of the experiment would walk into a room to find a group of people that they thought were other test subjects, but who were, in fact, paid actors. The whole group would be shown a card with a line on it and then a second card with three lines of different lengths and were asked to identify which of the lines on the second card was the same length as the line on the first. They would go around the room with each person giving their opinion and then they would move on to a new set of cards with different lines.

The first few rounds were set up to be easy and everyone would quickly agree on the correct line. But after a while one of the paid actors would say that he or she thought the line was the same length as one that was clearly wrong and one by one the other paid actors would agree with the incorrect answer. At first, the subject of the experiment would be visibly shocked when the first person gave the incorrect answer and get more and more uncomfortable as the rest of the group agreed with the same incorrect answer. Eventually they started to doubt their own eyes and - you know where this is going - would end up agreeing with the group and giving the incorrect answer themselves. By the end of the experiment, around 75% of people had agreed with the wrong answer when placed in this situation.

This is norm matching - and it dictates far more of our behaviour than we'd like to think. Humans are hard-wired to adopt the behaviour that helps them belong to a group, even with people they have never met before. This is because our brains are not designed for the 21st century. They're designed for 20,000 years ago when it was essential to be a member of a group in order to survive. Above all else, our brains are designed to keep us alive, so our sub-conscious is constantly telling us that we need to be a member of a group in order to survive. It is, silently, yelling at us: "if you don't belong, you'll die". And most people have no idea this is going on.

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It turned out that one of the main variables on the norm matching effect shown in Solomon Asch's experiment was the size of the group. If there was only one person to disagree with about the length of the line, most people would just disagree, but as the group size got larger, people were much more likely to go along with the group and ignore their own instincts.

Why does this matter for organisations?

If people will adopt the behaviour of those around them even when they've just met them and are contrary to their own instincts, what will they do when they're amongst a group that they know and whose opinions they rely on for their status and continued employment?

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The rules of belonging in your group dictate the behaviours of the vast majority of the people in it. The rules of belonging in your group dictate what the culture of your group is. The next time someone talks to you about the 'culture around here', I urge you to think of the conversation as being one about the rules of belonging. You have to notice them before you can change them. If you want to change the culture of your organisation, you need to understand the current rules of belonging and change them to encourage the behaviours that will help your business be successful. If you're expecting your people to change their behaviour without the new behaviour earning greater belonging, tens of thousands of years of evolution will be working against you and you will have no idea why your change efforts are failing.

You can't change the way human brains are wired, but if you understand them, you can work with them instead of against them.



Fiona Robertson is a culture change, leadership and team effectiveness coach, trainer and speaker who helps leaders create teams and organisations that thrive.

She can be contacted via fionarobertson.com, fiona@fionarobertson.com or +61 (0)3 8719 8020.