Six Ways to Help People Change

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If you want to help someone reach their goals, follow these steps.

BY ART MARKMAN | MARCH 7, 2016

Often in life, you may find yourself trying to help other people change. Whether you're acting as a mentor, a parent, or a well-meaning spouse, you hope to exert a positive influence and assist someone in reaching their goals. What's the best way to do this?
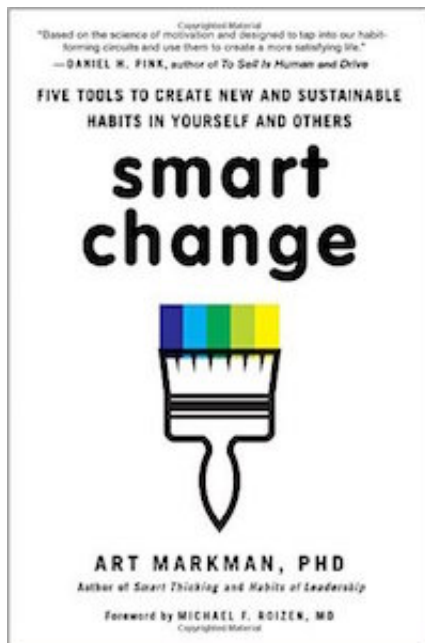
If you want to influence other people's behavior, then you need to develop trust. The core of trust in persuasive interactions is authenticity—the degree to which people think that the public face you have adopted fits who you really are inside. When people feel you are telling them things you truly believe, they are less likely to be skeptical of their interactions with you.

Thus you have to see yourself as others see you. What do people perceive your motivations to be? Behavior change is hard enough to accomplish when people are willing to engage in the process. When they have reason to shy away from it because

they are concerned about your motives, then you have made things even more challenging for yourself.

While any one of the suggestions provided below for helping others change will work to some degree on its own, combining them is even more effective.

1. Lead by example

This essay is adapted from *Smart Change: Five Tools to Create New and Sustainable Habits in Yourself and Others* (TarcherPerigee, 2014).

If you want other people to change, start with yourself and make sure the things you want them to change about themselves are things you do effectively yourself. "Do as I say and not as I do" is not a formula for success. But that's only the first step.

It is important to engage *visibly* in the goals that you want them to adopt. When you lead by example, your actions will serve as a source of goal contagion for other people in your environment. Your actions help people see how a goal can be accomplished successfully.

Many professors I know make a point of working in their offices with their doors open. They would probably be more productive keeping their doors

closed or perhaps even working from home. They would get more done if they were interrupted less often. The point of working in a visible way, though, is to give students a sense of what is required for success in academia. To balance teaching classes, doing research, writing papers, reviewing papers for journals, writing grants, and doing administrative service for the university, most faculty I know put in long workdays. Faculty talk to their students about the importance of putting in this time, but it is easier for students to internalize the effort needed to succeed by seeing their faculty mentors at work.

If you engage in the same behaviors you expect of others, then you're exhibiting the highest form of authenticity.

2. Suggest goals

A goal is an end state that provides a focus for your motivational energy. Goals that are near in time get more energy than goals that are distant in time. The more active the goal, the bigger the influence on behavior. Consequently, you are biased against doing things that will pay off in the long run when there is some other activity you could do now to achieve a short-term goal.

So if you want to help someone change, your task is to help him or her formulate daily short-term goals that will ultimately lead to long-term success—*and then help them remember those goals*. Think like a

business selling a product. Most businesses would never survive if they sold a product to a person only once. People's actions are driven by specific circumstances. If you show people the conditions in which the product is used—through, say, an ad or product placement in a movie—then they will be reminded to use the product in those situations when they encounter them later. The same is true of drinking less alcohol or getting more exercise—the goal is important, but it helps to be constantly reminded of that goal. That could mean leaving little notes on the fridge ("Drink less beer!"), or hanging up the gym bag in the foyer of the house.

3. Give the right feedback

Feedback can influence the mindset people adopt about behavior and motivation. People often give others feedback that inadvertently reinforces an "entity mindset," which describes accomplishments as the result of fixed traits. If you see a friend on a diet at a party eating a small plate of fruit, you might say to him, "Wow, you have remarkable willpower, I couldn't do that." On the surface, this is a compliment. However, underlying this statement is the idea that willpower is an entity that cannot be changed. The dieter might be exhibiting great willpower in that circumstance, but if he gives in to temptation in some other circumstance, does that now mean that he has reached the limits of his willpower?

It is better to give positive feedback that does not reinforce an entity mindset. For that same dieter, you say, "I'm impressed that you have managed to avoid all of these tempting desserts. What is your secret?" You are still providing a positive message, but you are not assuming that there is some fixed capacity for willpower. Instead, you're inviting him to tell you about all of the strategies he has put together to support his success at sticking to his diet under difficult circumstances. This kind of feedback promotes an incremental mindset, which acknowledges that most abilities are skills that can be nurtured.

The encouragement you give also needs to be tailored to a person's stage of change. Research by Ayelet Fishbach and her colleagues at the University of Chicago shows that positive and negative feedback have different influences on people. Positive feedback helps make people more committed to a goal. Negative feedback is particularly good for spurring people to make more progress.

When people are first starting to change their behavior, positive feedback is valuable because it helps them feel a greater sense of commitment toward the goal they want to achieve. These early stages of behavior change can be a fragile time, so it's helpful to reinforce commitment to change. Over time, however, people shift their own thinking away from their overall commitment to the goal to their sense of progress. At that point, they are

motivated by negative feedback, which reminds them of the distance between where they are now and where they would like to be.

Of course, this negative feedback does not make people feel good. Even in the later stages of behavior change, people still enjoy getting positive feedback more than they enjoy getting negative feedback. But at the later stages of change, the positive feedback is not nearly as motivating as the negative feedback.

Although it can be difficult to give negative feedback, it is important to be willing to make people uncomfortable when working with them to change behavior. If you're helping people manage

their careers, then you can use discomfort to help them get motivated to seek a promotion. Studies suggest that when you focus people on the contribution they have made at work, they are happy with their current job but they do not actively seek a promotion. If you focus people on what still remains to be achieved in their careers, then they feel bad about their current job but are motivated to move upward. Remind yourself that giving negative feedback to people who are already committed to behavior change can spur them to improve.

4. Support good habits

In his book *The Checklist Manifesto*, surgeon Atul Gawande extols the virtues of checklists in a variety of situations in which the same task has to be performed repeatedly. He talks about how one significant source of infections in hospitals comes when a staff member in the intensive care unit (ICU) has to put in a central line, which is a long thin tube that's inserted into a vein in the chest so medicines can be delivered directly into the bloodstream. When these lines get infected, it can put ICU patients (who are already quite sick) in serious danger.

As Gawande points out, if the ICU staff covers the patient with a drape when the line is being inserted and uses chlorhexidine soap, then the incidence of these infections goes down dramatically. Hospitals in Michigan got a medical equipment manufacturer

to bundle the drapes and the soap in a single kit and then gave staff in the ICUs a checklist to make sure that they carried out each step in the same order every time. This combination of changes to the environment and routine created a consistent mapping that was repeated often. It lowered the incidence of central line infections to near zero, which greatly improved patient outcomes.

When you want to change the behavior of the people around you, think about how you can create consistent mappings in the environment. Are there methods of getting people to reorganize their environment in ways that will support the creation of habits? Can you influence people to perform an action often enough that they'll acquire a habit?

5. Take advantage of laziness

People want to minimize both the amount of time spent thinking about their behavior and the amount of effort required to act. You want to make the desirable behaviors as easy as possible to perform and the undesirable behaviors hard to perform.

The simplest way to make this happen is to have control over people's environment. California bans smoking in workplaces—and indeed, in any public space. As a result, employees have to walk a long way just to have a cigarette—which in many circumstances makes smoking very hard to do.

There are other ways to manipulate environments to encourage desired behaviors. The city of Austin has installed a number of dog hygiene stations all over town. These stations consist of a garbage can with a liner and a dispenser with plastic mitts that can be used to pick up dog waste. These stations make it easier for dog owners to clean up after their dogs, which cuts down on the number of people who fail to do so.

6. Develop support networks

Generating communities around a process is an efficient way of engaging people to change their behavior.

That is the function of groups like Toastmasters International, which aims to help people improve their public speaking skills. Giving talks in public is routinely listed as one of the most stressful events in people's work lives. This anxiety becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, because the stress of giving a talk hurts people's performance when they get up to do it. Toastmasters organizes groups of people who get together, give presentations, and give feedback to each other. The atmosphere is

professional but relaxed, so the community works to help others get more comfortable with speaking in public. Many people who have been helped by this group continue to attend meetings to help new members improve their skills. In this way, Toastmasters functions as a source of both mentors and partners in behavior change.

That is ultimately the recipe for a successful support community:

- Find a process that engages a group of people.
- Focus on creating a neighborhood around that process.
- Add experts who can give people good advice to help them achieve their goals.

Social relationships are a critical part of behavior change—and conversations are a critical part of relationships. Parents of school-age children are often deeply involved in their kids' education. A community of other parents facing the same challenges can be a great source of support. Groups like this enable behavior change to be made as part of a larger process, like parenting. The conversations they have on the playground or at PTA meetings can change behavior, growing organically out of networks that are built on discussion.

We are intensely social creatures—and, of course, conversation is a two-way street. Your own behavior is being shaped by others all the time! To

really understand how to help people change, it's valuable to think about the ways other people try to influence your behavior. Because so many of your behaviors are driven by habits, there are many actions you take on a daily basis that you do not consciously choose to take. To the extent that other people are affecting your environment, your neighborhood, and the development of your habits, you may have ceded control of your behavior to them.

Understanding the ways that people can manipulate your motivational system will allow you to recognize when others are affecting your actions. So even if you have no interest in influencing other people's behavior, these tips will allow you to recognize when other people are affecting yours. At that point, you can decide for yourself if their influence is bringing you closer to your goals—or pushing you further away from them.

About the Author

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Art Markman, Ph.D., is Annabel Irion Worsham Centennial Professor of Psychology and Marketing at the University of Texas at Austin. He got his Sc.B. in Cognitive Science from Brown and his Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of Illinois. He has published over 150 scholarly works on topics in higher-level thinking including the effects of motivation on learning and performance, analogical reasoning, categorization, decision making, and creativity. Art serves as the director of the program in the Human Dimensions of Organizations at the University of Texas. Art is also co-host of the NPR radio show *Two Guys on Your Head*, produced by KUT Radio in Austin, and author of the *Popular Psychology* blog *Ulterior Motives*, which is about the interface between motivation and thinking.