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Most workplaces face constant imperatives for change—from trivial-seeming matters such as installing new office printers to major ones such as implementing new policies to support diversity. The question of *how* to drive change, though, is perennially vexing.

Some things make it easier: If you are the boss, you can order change (although that doesn't always work). If you have a broad coalition, you can create the perception of a flood of support. If people rely on your work output, you can impose conditions on how and when you'll deliver it.

Often, though, the people charged with driving change don't have any of these things. Consider Brian Welle, a Google manager who needed to roll out a huge initiative to tackle the problem of unconscious bias in the workplace. Some people are very receptive to investigating their own biases and trying to reduce them. Others, though, reject the notion that they might unwittingly hold prejudice, as reflected in some people's indignant reactions to the slogans "check your privilege" and #blacklivesmatter. Convincing a Google-sized workforce not to resist his ideas, let

alone embrace his initiatives, was a huge challenge for Brian—who was not the boss, didn't lead a huge coalition among those he was trying to influence, and couldn't horse trade to compel their cooperation. He was just a guy from People Analytics—in other companies, that would mean HR—who was planning presentations to try to change people's minds.

It's no surprise that people resist organizational change—they are overworked and overburdened, and simply don't have the bandwidth to embrace change. Further, they rely on habits and routines to help them meet their own work demands, and so change—which disrupts those habits and routines, and forces people to engage in new, active, and energy-demanding ways—appears highly undesirable. So when change agents like Brian can't rely on power, rank, or wide support, they need good strategy.

An effective strategy for creating change requires several elements, but one of the most important is to convince people to alter their attitudes—to move from rejection to openness, at least, or embrace, at best. If you can create change in people's attitudes, it's much easier to change their behavior.

The Power of Baby Steps

Psychologists Muzafer Sherif and Carl Hovland identified a powerful dynamic about attitude change, and gave it a clunky name: *the latitude of acceptance*. Here's how it works: We can think of any attitude on a continuum from pro to con. For example, some Googlers were likely excited to see the company address unconscious bias (strong pro), others likely resented the effort, believing that they were not biased and did not need to change (strong con), and others had reactions somewhere in between.

Wherever your own attitude along the continuum, Sherif and Hovland argued, you are willing to entertain some other views, but only within a narrow range around your own attitude—this range is the latitude of acceptance, or “OK zone.” A Google engineer in Brian's presentation audience might think, “I'm not biased and I don't need to change”; if so, her OK zone would likely include attitudes such as, “Diversity initiatives are a waste of time” or “Some people like to make me feel guilty about the success I've worked hard to attain.”

Are You the Best Messenger?

The “OK Zone” approach is extremely effective in many situations, but be aware of a key limitation: Sometimes people are strongly invested in a position not because they've thought it through, but out of a sense of identity or moral intuition. For example, in current debates over science-related policy (regarding vaccinations, climate change, or GMOs), some people embrace views that contradict scientific findings because of religious convictions or because they identify strongly with “clean” movements that oppose intervention in nature. Even before opening their mouths, advocates face huge challenges in persuading such individuals to consider a more pro-science view: Being identified with the scientific community paradoxically makes their arguments suspect. The OK zone can be used to produce movement even among strong partisans; however, it may have to be used in a more covert way. Recruiting someone less objectionable—a fellow clean eater or a credible religious figure—to deliver the message is one tactic that helps overcome this problem.

If Brian's presentation started with a big slide proclaiming “All of you are biased”—that is way outside of this engineer's OK zone. It's in her latitude of *rejection*—or the “reject zone.” This is the crucial point: When attitudes are too far from our OK zone, we not only don't buy them—we actively retrench against them. We marshal all of our resources to oppose the person making the argument. If Brian started his presentation by proclaiming that everyone is biased, the engineer would likely respond by becoming even more committed to denying any bias in herself. If we want to change someone's attitude, first we need to understand where that person's OK zone is. We do this by asking questions to identify where they are on the attitude continuum *right now*.

Finding the OK Zone

In 2005, Dave Licher was a project manager for a large defense contractor. One of his projects was to replace thousands of one-off copiers, printers, scanners, and fax machines—many sitting in people's own offices—with multifunction devices (MFDs) that required leaving one's office and walking down the hallway. These days, the office multifunction print machine is a familiar fixture. But 10 years ago, it was new, and

introducing one to the workplace meant asking people to change habits that were deeply ingrained and replace them with something whose benefits were unknown, but whose immediate inconvenience was obvious.

Dave encountered immediate resistance, notably from Ken (not his real name), the manager of a large unit, who insisted that he didn't want his people's work "disrupted"—and Ken's influence meant that many others followed his lead. Dave wasn't sure why Ken was so vehement, but he knew he needed Ken on board. His first move was to get up from his own desk and walk to Ken's office to ask—with genuine curiosity—for Ken's views. Ken explained that his staff was already under the gun and couldn't afford to spend the extra time needed for a new process. Then Dave asked how Ken typically handled his print jobs. Ken showed how he'd print from his computer to a local printer in his own office—a small, inefficient machine that took a long time to spit out the job. Then he'd have his administrative assistant walk that original down to a formal copy center to make stapled copies—copies that looked second-generation.

Dave had been prepared to pitch the new machines' superior properties and the cost savings, but the chat with Ken revealed the need for a different approach. Dave asked for just one step from Ken: to allow Dave to install a software driver, right then and there, on Ken's computer, so that he could show him one print process—and if Ken didn't like it, Dave would go away (for now). Ken agreed, Dave installed, and then Dave asked Ken to print a document. This time, though, the job was sent to the new MFD, a few doors away. By the time they walked to it, Ken's job—all copies, fully stapled, and all first-generation quality—were waiting for him. No assistant, no walk downstairs, no wait for the copy center to get to it. Ken became a big supporter, and when others heard that “hard case,” change-resistant Ken was on board, they decided the change must really be a good thing.

Dave's willingness to understand Ken and tailor his “ask” to Ken's OK zone meant that Ken was willing to embrace a change he had fought. The small step of getting Ken on board helped roll out the switch to MFDs. And the MFD switch, though it may seem like a small project, ultimately saved the company \$85 million over 5 years.

Changing the OK Zone

Of course, changing the OK zone typically requires more than a simple, one-step demonstration. Consider Brian Welle's initiative again. Brian designed an hour-long presentation (which you can watch online) to pitch Google's new initiatives around unconscious bias. (A presentation is generally not the most powerful way to use the baby-steps approach to change—individual, face-to-face discussions tend to be more effective—but Brian had to influence a lot of people in a short time and he used baby steps so masterfully that he pulled off “change-by-presentation.”) Within the video, you can see how he went to his audience's OK zone and moved it, step by step, toward his target.

First, he acknowledged Googlers' identities as smart people who like data and evidence (0:30). He next encouraged audience members to acknowledge that it was *possible* that we all make suboptimal decisions at times—particularly about other people (0:53). He presented research (1:15) showing how people very much like his Google audience can be biased in some situations, and then (3:20) recast the notion of “bias” entirely by showing how bias can be a positive and adaptive thing, such as when it allows us to recognize dangerous animals and avoid being eaten. This let him, in short order, invite the audience to think they *might* sometimes show the positive kinds of bias (4:38) and then acknowledge that they *definitely* do so (5:00). From here, it wasn't too big a step to helping the audience confront that they also have some biases they don't like so much (9:27), and then that it's worth trying to work on such biases.

Avoiding Common Errors

Using this incremental approach can help you avoid some of the major pitfalls that threaten efforts to drive change. These pitfalls include:

- Trying to achieve “conversion” and not just progress. Don't

At this point, the phrase “slippery slope” may have come to mind. In fact, that's exactly what we're using. You create a slippery slope by presenting small, incremental attitude positions and helping the person move from one to the next. Time and patience are often required with

expect to achieve all your goals in a single shot.

- Talking mostly to people who already agree with you.
- Trying to drive change without others' help. Messages are more persuasive when they seem to arise from many people, and they're less easily dismissed as one person's "pet project."
- Relying primarily on email blasts. Even well-crafted messages don't result in major change.
- Motivating change primarily by appealing to lofty principles. Self-interest beats lofty principles.

this approach, though sometimes it goes very quickly. And the attitude change it creates is much deeper and more genuine than that created by speech-making, peer pressure, or giving orders.

The process of using baby steps can seem time consuming in the abstract. Brian shows that it doesn't have to be. He uses just 13 minutes from the start of his presentation to bring the audience along on a step-by-step argument that—as we can see from the body language and energy of the audience members shown on camera—people are now buying. He never takes a rigid or confrontational stance, but acknowledges his audience's likely views at each stage, treats those views as legitimate, and uses them to build a case that is effective

because it incorporates their views.


Like any change effort, effective use of this approach requires some planning. You'll work not by sending email blasts and trying to convert the entire organization at once, but by targeting carefully selected individuals in carefully tailored ways. A few key questions to ask yourself when you need to leverage the power of baby steps to create change are:

- What is this particular stakeholder's current attitude about the proposed change?
- What are the small steps that will take this particular person from his current attitude to where you need him to be?
- Can you enlist "evangelists" to advocate the change instead of carrying the water by yourself?
- How much change do you require from each person? Does she need to come around entirely to embrace your view? Or is it sufficient to move her OK zone closer toward you, without getting all the way there?

Whether you're buying new printers, reducing bias...or merging departments, revising reporting relationships, or anything else...consider using the power of baby steps in your change initiative. By investing just a bit of up-front effort, you'll almost certainly achieve stronger and more widespread support.

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