

# The ABCs of Partnering with Business Leaders

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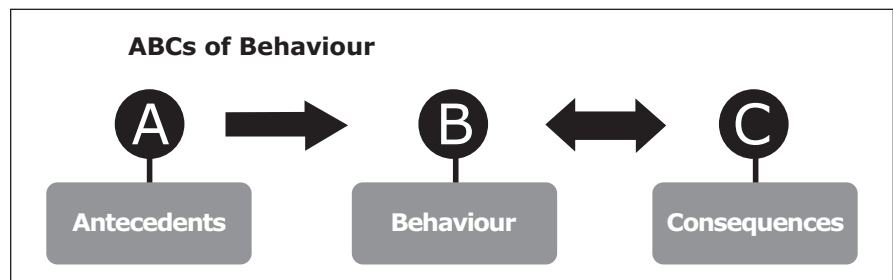
**This is** a defining time for HR professionals. At a time when executive teams are searching for ways to meet ever-increasing business demands, HR leaders are looking for ways to gain credibility as true partners in the business. The challenge for HR leaders is to navigate through the stated needs of both groups to find a solution. It's an opportunity waiting to be seized. Industry leaders across North America have already seized the opportunity with a little-known secret: the application of behavioural science to business drives both improved relationships with employees and better business results.

## The Science

With decades of research behind them, the fundamental principles of behavioural science continue to be a formula for success in shaping the behaviours critical to achieving business results. Behavioural science is a school of psychology that focuses on the study of observable aspects of human behaviour to understand why people engage in certain behaviours.

## ABCs of Behaviour

At the heart of the science, there are two main elements that influence an individual's behaviour: Antecedents (such as training, tools, and clear goals) come before the behaviour and prepare people to act. Consequences follow the behaviour and increase or decrease the likelihood that they will act in the same way again. While antecedents are necessary to get the behaviour started, consequences provide



motivation to continue the behaviour. Without strong consequences, employees tend to shift to other behaviours.

In their simplest form, consequences have two effects on behaviour. Encouragers (such as rewards, simplified workload, or positive feedback) support the behaviour and make it more likely the individual will continue that behaviour. Discouragers (such as punishment, increased workload, or a manager's reprimand) reduce the likelihood that the individual will engage in the behaviour again.

## ABCs in Action

The behavioural approach has proven itself with hundreds of executives and HR leaders across North America. By demonstrating their knowledge of behaviour, HR leaders who understand the science have earned the right to sit at the executive table as a partner with the business. Common among these leaders are four key actions:

### 1. Clarify the Vision

All organizations have a vision, mission, and set of related goals. But in some organizations that vision is clearer than in others. Helping ensure

that the organization's vision is clear and is communicated to everyone is the first step toward helping leaders succeed. Without a clear vision, leaders do not have a picture of what they need to do to attain success, making it impossible to rally their teams around toward that goal. HR leaders are in a unique position to help executives clarify their vision and implement activities that support that vision.



## 2. Understand the Leaders' Role

In an organization, leaders have the primary accountability for ensuring that antecedents and consequences are appropriately aligned to support employees' key behaviours. Armed with a clear vision and an understanding of behavioural science, leaders can ensure that their teams are set up for success by asking a series of questions, including:

Questions to ask around antecedents include:

- Is the goal clear? Does he know what he needs to do to be successful?
- Has she been adequately trained and coached on that procedure?
- Does he have the necessary tools and access to the right technology?

Questions to ask around consequences include:

- What happens when she raises problems to her boss?
- How does he handle receiving feedback from a direct report?
- When she follows the new procedure, what's the result?

Often, asking questions like these will highlight places across the organization where "best intentions" are not supported by actual consequences. In these instances, employees are not engaging in the key behaviours because the organization is not set up to support them. The leader's role is to assess the situation and adjust the antecedents and consequences in a way that best supports the employee.



### ABC example:

## Dave's weekly updates

Consider the case of Dave – a director of Field Services – who is frustrated that his field foremen can't seem to complete weekly schedule updates in a timely manner. Every Monday, Dave attends a meeting with his boss to give an update on the work that has been completed against the project schedule. Week after week, Dave goes to the meeting without input from the foremen. Finally, Dave decides that it is time to "fix" the problem and meets with his team to find out why he can't get their schedule updates on a weekly basis.

After listening to a variety of complaints and excuses, Dave takes an ABC approach, asking: "Are the foremen clear about why and when we need their updates?" The team responds that the original request for weekly updates was sent out via e-mail and some foremen are "not the best about reading their e-mail."

Next Dave asks, "What skills might be missing that would keep foremen from sending weekly schedule updates?" The team suggests that "some of the old-timers don't know how to use computers, so sending a weekly e-mail is out of the question, unless the local office clerk does it for them."

Now, convinced that he is finally getting to the real issues behind his frustration, Dave asks, "What tools or resources do the foremen need to complete these weekly updates?" The IT specialist volunteers that "in some remote locations, there is no phone service – let alone e-mail access."

With three good answers in hand, Dave ventures to ask a fourth: "If we fixed these three issues, would the foremen send in weekly schedule updates?" The team unanimously replies "No."

Dave persists by asking "What would motivate the foremen to complete the weekly update?" With that, the team brainstorms ways to reduce the discouraging consequences for completing the updates, and provide encouraging consequences for those who complete their updates on time.

Situations like the one that Dave is facing are all too common. Often, employees are inadvertently set up to fail. They work in environments that neither promote nor support the key behaviours that will allow them to be most successful. Further, the "problem analysis" leaders use to diagnose the situation is frequently subjective. By taking a more objective, scientific (behavioural) approach to resolving organizational issues, leaders learn to work with employees to understand what antecedents employees need to engage in the desired behaviour, what consequences are discouraging them, and what consequences would encourage them to continue the behaviour. This approach not only solves the problems, but does it in a way that brings leaders and employees closer together.

By partnering with business leaders to develop a leadership team that understands – and applies – the science of behaviour, HR leaders can build a successful leadership program that focuses as much on "what" leaders accomplish as it does on "how" they get the results. In this way, the program becomes an integral component to building the future of the organization. The HR leaders are valued as much for their progress in shaping the culture of the company as for their ability to teach leaders how to deliver results.

### 3. Identify the Gaps

Armed with the understanding that leaders are the main (although not the only) source of antecedents and consequences for employees, HR leaders can now ask the question, "How prepared are our leaders to provide the necessary Antecedents and Consequences?" Whether through an assessment, survey, or direct observation, understanding and communicating the connection between leadership

skill gaps and business results is critical to developing a leadership program that gets results.

### 4. Go Beyond Training

As we all know, once you have identified the leadership skill gaps, the next step is to fill them. Organizations usually rely on training to fill skill gaps. However, as professionals who understand behavioural science, we know that training is only an antecedent. If you

really want to change behaviours for the long-term, you need to look beyond training and set up consequences that will support the new behaviours (including on-the-job coaching). ■

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