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When the Client Won't Move: Understanding the Causes of Resistance by Leveraging the Laws of Human Behavior

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As internal champions of change or those that work as outside consultants, we may have worked for clients and companies that have asked us to secure improvements in results only to find that our recommendations are taken half-heartedly or rejected outright. Our front-end assessment of the situation and the organization's culture using pinpointed tools such as surveys or onsite observation indicated a course of action. We may have conferred with key organizational leaders to establish alignment and uncovered the business drivers that were foundational for establishing the "why" to justify the effort and investment required to move to a new level of performance. We reviewed management communications and interviewed leaders at each level of the organization. All of this to make sure we were on target with our recommendations, and still the leaders would not move. Why? The author will offer key insights based upon 80 years of research within the field of behavior analysis.

Why would an executive of a successful company invest significant money with a consulting firm or alternatively, hire a full-time internal champion only to choose not to embrace the recommendations that are made? The answer to that question can be as varied as the personalities involved. Objections can range from being too expensive, to being "inappropriate for our group," or the definitive "that would never work here." When consultants hit the proverbial brick wall with a client or prospective client, they normally look for clues as to what the root cause of the resistance is. They assume, and rightfully so, that something has been missed. Possibly a question was not asked that should have been. Sometimes we are successful in uncovering the foundation of a leader's concerns; however, other times we seem unable to discover what the real concern is.

Applying the principles of human behavior from a scientific point of view can be useful in these situations. The late B. F. Skinner, the eminent Harvard professor, conducted research and developed theories related to why people do what they do. Using that body of work as a foundation, Aubrey C. Daniels developed a systematic methodology that allows us to practically apply the principles that Skinner formulated.

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Consequences: What They Are and Why They Are Important

Foundationally, "people do what they do because of what happens to them when they do it" (Daniels, 2000, p. 25). In other words, it is all about the consequences people experience following a behavior. Daniels stated, "Technically defined, behavioral consequences are those things and events that follow a behavior and change the probability that the behavior will be repeated in the future" (p. 25). Consequences are neither good nor bad; they are simply defined by their impact on behavior. Every person that we work with has a history of consequences that they bring to a current situation. For example, Bill was asked by his manager to develop an approach that would solve a performance issue. Bill spent hours developing an approach and then pitched the idea, only to have it rejected outright. If that happens two or three times in a row, Bill may not be ready to march up the hill again! In this case, the consequences that Bill has experienced are influencing Bill's behavior. The ABC (**A**ntecedent-**B**ehavior-**C**onsequence) model is useful in understanding the affect on Bill's behavior (Daniels, p. 35):

$$A: B \rightarrow C$$

- **Antecedent:** Something that comes before a behavior that sets the stage for the behavior to occur at least once.
- **Behavior:** What the person says or does.
- **Consequence:** What happens to the performer during or immediately after the behavior?

In Bill's case, the *antecedent* is the request from his boss to develop an approach. Bill writes a proposal, the *behavior*, and his boss rejects his proposal (*consequence*). As we mentioned earlier, if this happens to Bill repeatedly after he spends time and effort creating proposals and new approaches only to have them rejected, unless Bill enjoys these journeys of futility, the likelihood that he will stop developing proposals increases. We can say that the consequences that are being delivered by Bill's boss have influenced Bill's behavior and will now guide him in his future behavior, which is to say that past consequences have now become antecedents for future behavior. Future requests from Bill's boss, in all likelihood, will not have the same effect on Bill's behavior. This simple example begins to answer the question as to why a leader may be reluctant to move forward with our recommendations or in the worst case, reject them outright.

The Practical Application of the ABC Model

From a behavioral science point of view, our recommendations–no matter how brilliant they are, are nothing more than antecedents. They are designed to trigger, prompt, or queue the leader to take action and make a decision. However, the research suggests antecedents are only partially responsible (approximately 20%) for causing the targeted behavior to occur. Our proposals, reports, meetings, e-mails, and phone conversations act as antecedents. The solution to the problem may be in shifting our attention to the *right* side of the ABC model. The research consistently validates the position that consequences play a much more powerful role, upwards of 80%, in managing future behavior.

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An antecedent, in this case, our proposal, is necessary for the leader to make a decision, but it is the leader's history of consequences or the consequences that they perceive will occur, that will ultimately guide their behavior to move forward.

If we are honest, we can see the ABC principle working in our own lives. A simple example would be the reason we have coffee in the morning. It may be because we enjoy the taste or because it makes us feel more alert. Consequences, such as taste and/or feeling, keep us going back for more. We may go to a new restaurant based upon the recommendation of a friend (antecedent), but if we have a bad experience (consequence) with the restaurant staff or the food does not meet our expectations, we probably will not be back…unless we enjoy poor service and bad food! Clearly, antecedents trigger behavior, but it is the consequences that either increase or decrease the probability that we will engage in that behavior again.

It has been suggested that organizational practitioners need to know the lay of the land before charting a course (Cohen, 2007). Leveraging the ABC model can help us better determine the topography of an organization. It suggests that our front-end assessment include questions and dedicated efforts that are designed to uncover the organizational consequences that a leader, group of leaders, and their followers are, or have historically operated under. This goes beyond looking for the proverbial *points of pain.* Ultimately, our goal is to understand the flow or rippling effect of consequences through each level of the organization.

Working with a leading engine manufacturer, I was involved in selling large capital equipment related to measuring finished engine components prior to final assembly. The builder I was representing was a smaller player in the business and we were, it appeared, hopelessly outgunned. However, one of the most critical components of the engine was the crankshaft, which was extremely complicated to gage. In conversations with the manager responsible for the crankshaft line, I suggested that he would run a high level of risk (a negative consequence with a high level of certainty) in awarding the crankshaft project to our competitor if they wanted it delivered on time. As it turned out, he was very concerned about a delayed delivery, and all other things being equal, the perceived risk and related consequence drove him to award the sale to my builder. How do I know? He mentioned it when he awarded the order.

Consequences are consistently molding our client's decision-making behavior, and we are now engaged at a point when consequences will shape their decision (knowingly or unknowingly) regarding our recommendations. To fail to understand the history of consequences that a leader has experienced or is currently working under, is to miss a significant piece of the puzzle as to "why" a manager may or may not make a particular decision.

Consequences and Resistance to Change

We could say that leaders and their followers are simply resistant to change, which is a typical fall-back position. Common sense suggests that leaders will resist change because they may not want change themselves. But is that view correct? The ABC model suggests that we will embrace change if the new behavior we are asked to engage in is likely to provide positive consequences. Let us take a moment to look at this practically.

How many of us go to the same restaurant for lunch every day, eat the same food at each meal or wear the same style or color of clothes every day? We may be creatures of habit, but we are constantly on the lookout for change and variety that we can bring into our lives. Why? Because we perceive that these things will make our lives better, more enjoyable, or more meaningful. How many times have operators been trained in the proper execution of a standard

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operating procedure and the engineer or supervisor finds that they are deviating from the steps that are clearly outlined because they found a better way? We, and others, tend to embrace change when the consequences work for us. How much more does this principle work for the leaders we are working with?

This brings us back to our proposals, recommendations, and conversations we have with clients. If they provide consequences that are beneficial, where the client finds that their conversations with us are useful and helpful because we are providing accurate information, etc, we begin to shape our client's history of consequences working with us. The question remains: Have we anticipated the types of consequences that our plan or strategy will cause them to experience? What about their followers? Can we, and should we, address how the positive and negative consequences can and should be managed? The answer is yes. However, we cannot do that without understanding more fully the laws of human behavior as it relates to consequences.

Daniels (2000) put forth the following illustration that allows us to better understand consequences from a behavioral perspective.

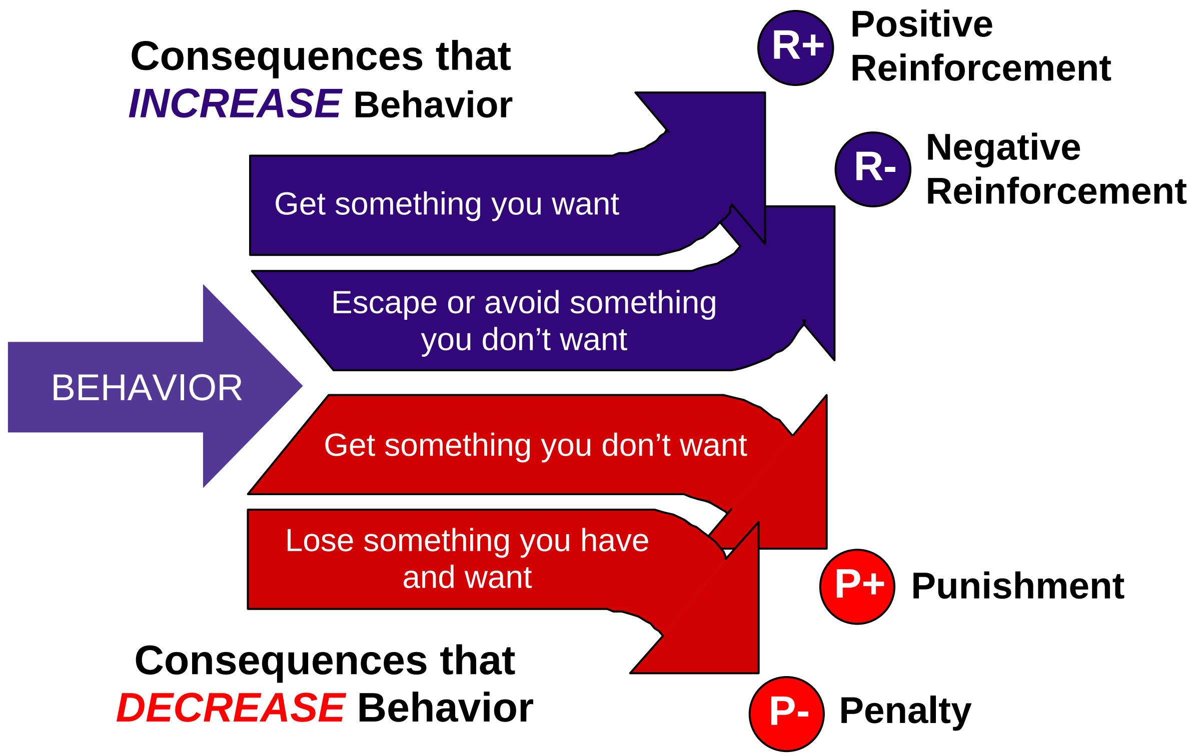

Figure 1. Aubrey Daniels International © 2007–Used with specific written permission of ADI. May not be used without the written permission of ADI in part or full.

The figure illustrates that there are four types of consequences. Two types of consequences, positive and negative reinforcement, increase the probability that the behavior will occur again; two decrease behavior, which are punishment and penalty. In the context of our discussion, a question presents itself—what types of consequences are most likely to occur for the leader, the staff and, just as important, for their followers—if our recommendations are embraced? Unless we can begin to engage and probe for those answers with our client's help, we run a high risk of failure. We must probe not only for the types of consequences that will occur,

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but we must put forth consequences that can and should be inserted into the equation that will allow the leaders and their followers to experience more positive reinforcement than other types of consequence. Aubrey Daniels (2000) classified consequences in three dimensions (p. 36):

1. *Type: Positive (P) or negative (N).* We ask the question, "Is the consequence positive or negative from the perspective of the performer?"
2. *Timing: Immediate (I) or future (F).* Here we want to know if the consequence will occur as the behavior is happening (immediate) or some time later (future).
3. *Probability: Certain (C) or uncertain (U).* This dimension expresses the probability that the performer will actually experience the consequence.

In addition, once we combine the type, timing, and probability of a consequence, research has established their relative power, as outlined in Figure 2 (Daniels & Daniels, 2004, p. 46).

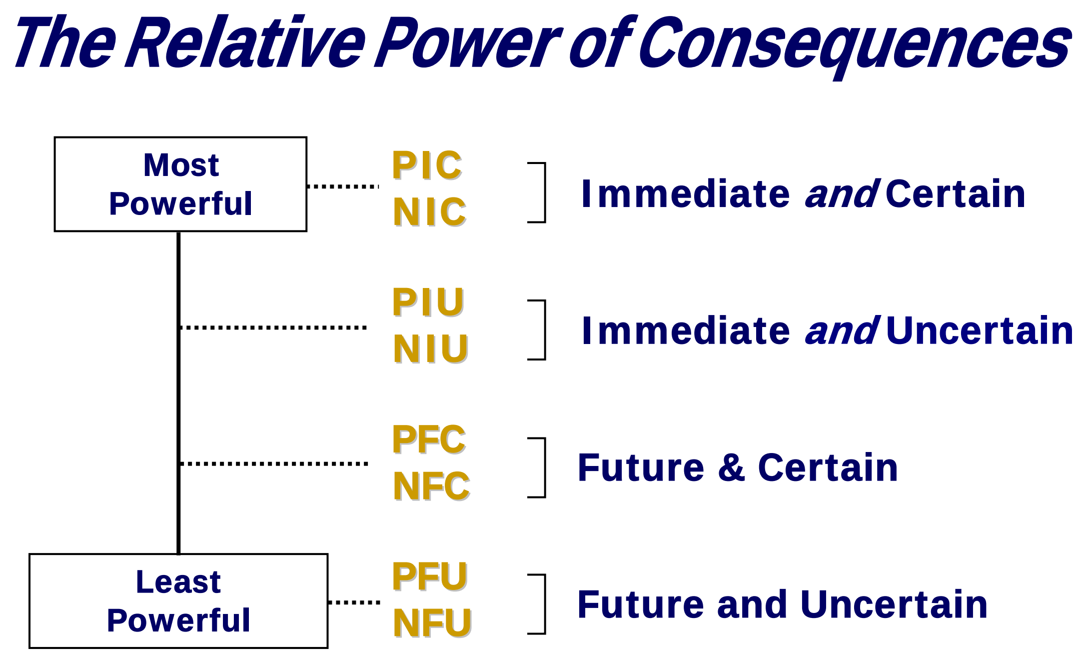

Figure 2. Aubrey Daniels International © 2007–Used with specific written permission of ADI. May not be used without the written permission of ADI in part or full.

Working with a global leader in telecommunications, we worked with their internal champion in implementing 290 projects—91% were related to improving quality, productivity, and morale. The projects focused primarily on manufacturing, research, and design issues. The client expected a 4:1 return, which we exceeded. The success and popularity of the program drove the number of projects to well over 400. The success was tremendous and highly publicized internally; however, one hurdle remained—the president achieved significant results in all key areas of the business, but was unwilling to require using the methodology throughout the company.

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The opportunity came to present the results at a staff meeting. As good as our results were, we knew that the president's staff was resistant to using our methodology for a number of personal and political reasons. To secure their involvement, we knew a consensus would be needed. At the end of the presentation, the president expressed his appreciation and addressed his staff, saying that if they *wanted* to use the methodology in their organizations, they should feel free to do so. Those that were resistant now had an out. The battle had been lost.

As we debriefed, it became clear that we had missed a critical consequence that the president was facing due to late deliveries. Negative reinforcement was being used by the corporate leadership—which would typically be called a "point of pain." Our presentation did not include recommendations for improving the on-time delivery that had a variety of root causes. We had addressed everything except what was critical to the person that could have required using our approach. Our team could have easily demonstrated that the consequences he was facing—negative, immediate, and certain (NICs), could have been shifted to PICs—positive, immediate, and certain consequences. It is not enough for consultants to expound on positive results that can be secured with a particular solution. The immediacy and the certainty of the results we believe can be realized should also be discussed and reviewed.

If we look at our clients as investors, which we should do if they are concerned with a return on their investment, additional behavioral research can be helpful. Robert Olsen (2007) in his article, "Investors' Predisposition for Annuities: A Psychological Perspective," suggested, "another factor that has risk implications of an affective nature is 'familiarity.' Other things being equal, objects or processes that appear familiar are feared less and are perceived as less threatening, even where the outcome is expected to be negative" (p. 54). This supports the thought that historical consequences, those familiar to our client, will undoubtedly effect their perception of the relative "safety" of our approach. Olsen goes on to suggest that even when we can "guarantee" high levels of measurable results within a certain amount of time, our client may be more interested in minimizing risk.

Conclusions

In summary, the following recommendations have been made based upon research in the field of behavioral science.

1. Leverage the ABC model to better understand the drivers behind a client's predisposition to your approach.
2. Investigate the possible sources of consequences that the client may experience if they were to move forward with your recommendations. Simply asking questions such as, "What keeps you up at night?" or "Where are the points of pain?" does not go far enough.
3. Remember that
    a. Research validates the position that consequences, not antecedents, have a stronger influence on behavior.
    b. The most powerful consequences are PICs and NICs.
4. Consequences minimizing risk may, in fact, be more "reinforcing" and therefore more apt to gain approval than those providing a high level of return but with a degree of uncertainty in the mind of the client.

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