



Manager at a loss? Changing unwanted behavior with OBM



INTRODUCTION

Based on the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis and supported by over 60,000 scientific studies, OBM has a solid scientific foundation

Many problems in IT service delivery can be attributed to human behavior. People behave differently than expected or agreed upon. More comprehensive process descriptions or implementing a new tool for service management rarely result in the desired behavioral change. According to Robert den Broeder, Organizational Behavior Management can offer a working and practical solution to behavioral issues.

ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR MANAGEMENT, abbreviated as OBM, is the field that deals with behavioral change in organizations. OBM originated in the United States, where it was first applied in 1959¹. Based on the principles of Applied Behavior Analysis and supported by over 60,000 scientific studies, OBM has a solid scientific foundation. It is rapidly gaining popularity within the IT sector, and for good reason: effectively applying OBM principles provides better control over the most challenging aspect of organizational change and development – human behavior.

Recent research by SRVision² indicates that 45% of respondents plan to work with OBM. Behavioral issues suddenly become solvable with the help of OBM. Whether it is related to safety, quality, productivity, compliance, agile or process-oriented work, OBM offers specific analysis techniques and the so-called "OBM Protocol," which assists practitioners in setting up and executing structured OBM interventions.

Achieving sustainable behavior change requires, among other things, a precise analysis of the physical and social environment in which people behave. When someone emits observable behavior, there is interaction with the physical and social environment. That interaction has an impact on the person emitting the behavior. This impact largely determines whether we will see that behavior more or less frequently in the future. Leaders play an important facilitating role in creating and maintaining good physical and social working conditions. Through their behavior, they can inspire, challenge and support people to perform excellently. However, leaders can just as easily demotivate people with their behavior, resulting in performance levels dropping.



BEHAVIORAL CHANGE AS A SUCCESS FACTOR

The working principles of OBM accelerate the learning process, leading to more frequent display of required behaviors.

It has been said and written before: IT service delivery is primarily about people.

IT organizations typically approach IT service delivery using frameworks and best practices such as ITIL and ISM, as well as management philosophies like Lean Six Sigma. Whatever approach an organization chooses, OBM aligns with it. Applying, for example, the governance mechanisms of ISM require the adjustment or introduction of specific behaviors.

The working principles of OBM accelerate the learning process, leading to more frequent display of required behaviors. Often, working according to such a framework or management philosophy proves challenging. For years, Paul Wilkinson³ has emphasized the importance of *'attitude, behavior, and culture,'* referring to it as the *'ABC iceberg'*⁴: *"ABC is like an iceberg, much of it is hidden, we don't see it, we don't talk about it, and we hope that it won't damage our ITIL/ITSM initiative."*

That behavior change has long been regarded as a crucial success factor for an ITSM initiative or agile transformation. IT processes, value streams and practices are all collections of activities. They convert input into output, or outcome, or they attempt to (co-)create value. Many of these activities are still performed by people. One remarkable observation is that people sometimes emit behavior that deviates from what you would expect, based on their knowledge, skills, and abilities. They choose to deviate from the process at times.

We all know examples of service desk employees who fail to register incidents or do so incorrectly. In almost every IT organization, we sometimes see changes being deployed to the production environment, without proper testing. The procedure is clear, yet people sometimes deviate from it, regardless of the consequences for the customer and the quality of IT service delivery. Managers are at a loss as a result. They have tried everything to correct these forms of unwanted behavior. Approaches to achieve the desired behavior change have, until now, been generally ineffective. As a result, many change initiatives require more time and energy than necessary and, unfortunately, encounter one or more avoidable pitfalls of behavior change⁵.

HOW DO WE IMPROVE THE SITUATION?

If you want to understand and influence the behavior of others, you need several skills.

Specify the desired result

This is an underrated skill. It can be challenging to specifically name results that contribute to organizational goals, when the goals themselves are not sufficiently defined. The leader takes the lead here. Leaders set organizational goals and help their people make the connection to desired results and outcomes.

Specifying results can sometimes go wrong. For example, the score on a performance indicator, such as customer satisfaction, is not a result. The customer satisfaction score is determined based on one or more delivered results, which influence that score. The score is, therefore, an assessment of emitted behaviors and delivered results.

Behavior change is a prerequisite for the success of any change initiative. Leaders are in charge. They need to further develop skills such as specifically naming desired results and behavior.

Specify the desired behaviors

When we ask leaders what behaviors they want to see, they might say things like:

- "Show more ownership and take more personal responsibility"
- "I wish they would do <behavior X> less frequently"
- "I would like to see people take more initiative"
- "Our communication needs to improve".

Note that the above descriptions are not specific behaviors. Specified behaviors can be demonstrated so that others can replicate it. I challenge you to demonstrate "ownership" or try "proactively showing initiative"!

Employees generally find it difficult when a leader tells them what they don't want to see. It is still unclear what they do want to see. Leaders help their employees by making it clear what specific behaviors they want to see. Those behaviors are necessary to make a demonstrable and meaningful contribution to the desired results of the organization. It is important to establish a cause-and-effect relationship. By emitting behavior X more frequently, we will achieve the desired result Y more often. It is *explicitly* not the intention for leaders to dictate or impose how the results should be achieved. The idea is to specify the desired results and come to an agreement with the team on *how those results can be achieved*.

CATCH PEOPLE IN THE ACT, WHILE EMITTING DESIRED BEHAVIORS

Leaders are typically well-trained in catching people emitting undesired behaviors. When something goes wrong, it immediately gets the attention of management. Unfortunately, what we often don't see enough of, is managers paying attention to *behaviors that go well*.

Desired behavior is all too often unintentionally ignored. "*Isn't that going well? Isn't that what we pay them for? Do I also need to pay attention to that?*" The answer to these questions is a resounding "yes"!

Catching people in the act of emitting desired behaviors has an important neurological effect: the production of dopamine. This addictive neurotransmitter encourages people to emit those behaviors more frequently. Emitting desired behavior more often leads to achieving the desired results more frequently. Which is exactly what you want as a leader!

GET ON THE FLOOR

Behavior change is a prerequisite for the success of any change initiative. Leaders are in charge. They need to further develop skills such as specifically naming desired results and behavior. "*Walk the Gemba*," go to the shopfloor, so that you can catch people in the act of emitting desired behavior and provide them with the necessary dopamine shots.

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