Process oriented workflows as a new habit?
That requires attention!

OBM dynamics

APMG International

INTRODUCTION

Imagine you are ultimately responsible for transforming your organization into a future-proofed digital operation. After achieving some small successes, you notice that the major breakthrough is not happening. In fact, quite soon, your staff start reverting to many of their old behaviors. You also realize that simply declaring "*it really needs to happen now*" is not yielding the desired results. One consolation: you are not alone!

Implementing a process-oriented approach such as ITIL®, Agile or DevOps rarely – on its own – results in turning new ways of working into habits. AG Connect previously stated that Organizational Behavior Management (OBM), as a scientifically proven approach, can help facilitate and sustain the desired cultural change. OBM cleverly combines behavioral science, business administration and neuroscience. So, what does an OBM trajectory look like? What can you expect when you embark on an OBM journey? Below, we discuss the OBM protocol in seven steps, using a practical example.

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1. Specify performance

Firstly, you need to define the desired performance in terms of desired outcomes and the associated desired behavior. It is important to be specific, so that someone can actively engage in the desired behavior as an observable action. Do not settle for a leader who simply declares that "*we need to work in a process-oriented manner.*" What behavior should someone emit? How can you determine if that person is performing well?

Tip: Break it down into terms that can be expressed through visible, observable actions. Without concrete actions, changing behavior and culture becomes an impossible task. Start small, with a few specifications on each department that all contribute to the overarching goal. We know from behavioral science that behavior is difficult to transform into a new habit. Such habits are formed through a specific process. Fortunately, this process is built into the OBM protocol, so it can be effectively influenced.

Here's an example from the field of Service Management:

There is dissatisfaction with the quality of service, and the work environment at the IT service desk of a hospital. The main problem is the demonstrably subpar quality of incident registration. Incomplete incidents lead to complaints from customers, colleagues in the second line of support, and management. This is detrimental to the atmosphere in the department.

Now, let's specify performance: an incident should contain sufficient details for second-line support colleagues. Through collaboration with those involved, this was translated into an adjusted questioning script. The specification of the desired performance was the percentage of correctly registered incidents. The desired end goal? Achieving a score of 85%.

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2. Measure performance

Once you know what you want to see, you then need to determine how often it currently occurs. This starts with a baseline measurement of the desired behavior. This measurement is compared to the end goal to determine the gap. Then you can incorporate measurement instruments and cycles to collect and process the necessary data.

Now, it's time to measure: the baseline measurement at the hospital's IT service desk showed that the percentage of correctly registered incidents was fluctuating around 30%. But how do we explain the outcome of this baseline measurement? Let's move on to step 3.....

3. Perform ABC Analysis

In this step, you use a powerful tool to identify and explain the root causes of behavior: the ABC analysis. Regarding behavior (the 'B' in the ABC model), two components are important: what precedes the behavior in time, and what follows the behavior. The former is called antecedent (A), and the latter is called consequence (C).

Scientific research shows that influencers primarily focus on antecedents, while behavior is most strongly influenced by the consequences it produces. Therefore, it is advisable to invest more time and energy in ensuring the appropriate consequences for the desired behavior.

In the hospital, there was no consensus on what information should be included in an incident report. Employees were doing their best, but everyone was working differently, and the instructions were not being followed. Moreover, investing in a different way of working takes time, and there is uncertainty about whether it will yield the desired results. The lack of positive feedback on the desired behavior was particularly noticeable. Conversely, there was negative feedback on the current way of working. In short, it needed to be more rewarding to exhibit the desired behavior.

With this information, you implement a combination of three interventions in OBM, which we will discuss individually below, although they can be seen as a whole:

4. Organize Performance Feedback

Performance Feedback helps people decide whether to emit a behavior more or less frequently. That's why OBM uses Visual Management (similar to Lean) which visually represents the achieved performance. The goal is to show where you stand and the effect of your behavior so that you can make adjustments.

At the hospital's service desk, a chart was displayed showing the percentage of correct incidents over time. Regular attention was also drawn to it.

5. Set (sub)goals

By defining intermediate goals alongside the end goal, everyone can relate the measured progress to an interim achievement. This increases the likelihood of having something to celebrate. This positive consequence facilitates the next step towards the next subgoal.

Based on the baseline measurement, a significant performance improvement was required at the hospital. The trick, each time, was to do slightly better than before. If that was achieved, the next goal was chosen through effective consultation. This goal was also plotted on the chart on the wall so that everyone could track the progress. The end goal was achieved within a period of six weeks, something that seemed impossible before. However, the power lies in the sixth step.

6. Reinforce

This is the most important intervention. As a leader, you want to encourage performers to experience positive consequences after delivering the desired performance. Ideally, this is done by harnessing the so-called '*dopamine effect*'. This hormone makes us feel good when we do something we enjoy, or when something succeeds. This increases the likelihood that we will repeat the behavior in similar situations. Companies have been influencing our behavior for decades thanks to knowledge about the dopamine effect; think of gambling, gaming, and social media.

With OBM, you use that same knowledge to bring out the best in people in the workplace, to optimize performance. It is mainly about positively reinforcing emitted behavior. The dopamine effect is strongest with a direct and certain positive consequence. The easiest way to achieve this is by using social rewards such as appreciation, recognition, and compliments. And that is fundamentally different from giving a bonus at the end of the year for achieving a result.

At our hospital, the incident reports were being documented more accurately, and the first compliments started coming in the ICT service desk's mailbox. These compliment emails were extensively discussed and displayed. The goal of 85% was not just achieved, but exceeded within six weeks. The atmosphere also improved significantly.

7. Evaluate, Adjust, and Conclude

You celebrate successes because it strengthens the behavior with a neurological effect. To create a habit, it is necessary to continue providing positive reinforcement. Our brain needs to feel that it is still worthwhile to continue emitting the behavior. Step 7 is intended to continuously adjust the context in terms of antecedents and consequences during the influencing process.

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After achieving the goal, the project at the ICT service desk did not stop. The manager reduced the frequency of measurement and also diluted the number of compliments. After some time, the new way of working became a habit. The manager's intervention had helped. And now that performance had improved and gains embedded, management was able to shift attention to another issue in the organization's journey towards implementing process-oriented workflows.

CONCLUSION

People learn from consequences, and they have a dopamine system that provides positive reinforcement. It makes us inclined to repeat positive behaviors. Performance is often determined by what people gain from an activity, and it goes beyond fundamental employment conditions. Leaders can learn how to harness these principles to bring out the best in people. This helps to optimize performance, ensure successful transitions, and to create a culture that attracts valuable people to work for (and remain with) them. In times of scarcity, this may be the most important reason to fully embrace OBM.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joost Kerkhofs (Neotopia) and Robert den Broeder (Trigono) are both veterans in assisting organizations with learning and applying OBM. Together, they develop educational materials and co-authored the book "Organizational Behavior Management - An Introduction" (Van Haren Publishing, 2020). Joost and Robert also established OBM Dynamics B.V. which designs, develops and distributes educational products in the field of Organizational Behavior Management (OBM) worldwide through its own network and that of its licensed partners.

OBM Dynamics partnered with APMG International to develop an OBM training and certification program.

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Article originally developed for and released via AG Connect, June 2022
https://www.agconnect.nl/artikel/obm-kan-nieuwe-werkmethode-laten-inslijten