

THE ABCS OF LEADERSHIP PRACTICE:

How rational emotive behavior therapy has contributed to leadership approaches to “small wins” and deviance.

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“YOUR BELIEFS ARE CAUSE MAPS THAT YOU IMPOSE ON THE WORLD,
AFTER WHICH YOU ‘SEE’ WHAT YOU HAVE ALREADY IMPOSED.”
~ Karl Weick¹

The continuum that measures, or estimates, both management and leadership can be useful, but there are distinct differences between the two practices that quickly show themselves in practice. While it is valuable to see management as “containing” or including leadership, this gives the sense that leadership is itself a tool available for managers instead of being a distinct area on a valid continuum. What it also ignores is that leadership can in itself be an objective. Central to this view is the difference between management and leadership: leadership is ultimately about change – fostering positive deviance in organizations – while management is about preserving the status quo and protecting the integrity of existing processes. This reality has been succinctly described by Robert Quinn: “I am very taken by the concept of positive deviance. Deviance is generally viewed as a bad thing. But on one end of the curve, we find deviance in the form of excellence, the very behavior we want to promote. Systems don’t like either positive or negative deviance, though, and are designed to crush both. So if we take risks to be excellent, the system will push back.”²

A relevant point about positive deviance and the part it plays in leadership practices, though, is that it applies equally well with both organizational leadership and self-leadership: it is a concept that is shared by both management and psychotherapy. Kim Cameron has commented on this aspect of deviance in describing his own work:

¹ Karl Weick, Rensis Likert Distinguished University Professor of Organizational Behavior and Psychology, Professor of Psychology at the University of Michigan; cited at <http://www.onepine.info/pweick.htm>.

² Robert Quinn, Margaret Elliot Tracy Professor of Organizational Behavior and Human Resource Management, the University of Michigan; interview with “JDS” cited at <http://www.nsd.org/library/publications/jsd/quinn224.cfm>.

Positive Organizational Scholarship, or POS, is a new movement in organizational studies and organizational development that focuses on that which is positive, flourishing, and life-giving in organizations. It investigates positive deviance, or the ways in which organizations and their members flourish and prosper in extraordinary ways.... It parallels a new movement in psychology that has shifted from a traditional focus on illness and pathology – such as deviancy, abnormality, and therapy – toward a positive focus on human strengths, virtues, positive affect, and what makes life worth living.³

This sharing of an advanced view of both management practices and psychology is not new – it is, in fact, one of the most basic elements of management or leadership science.

Behavioral therapy and psychology has been at the forefront of examining how management works, how people function within organizations and how leaders can and do lead. This paper observes how certain concepts within behavioral therapy have been essential to an understanding of the leadership (and management) practices of “small wins” and positive deviance.

In fact, it can be argued that both “small wins” and positive deviance are inseparable. Certainly it is true that “small wins” can operate far and away from any attempt at self- or organizational positive deviance, but the opposite is hard to dismiss. The foundation of movement toward positive deviance in both individuals and organizations is in making incremental changes in order to achieve buy-in. This buy-in is either at a departmental or organizational level, or when considering individual change the personal level – the truism that one must want to change in order to effect meaningful change is widely accepted. It is with this in mind that “small wins” leads to positive change, which is deviance.

³ Kim Cameron, Professor of Management and Organizations at the University of Michigan; interview with “T+D”, cited at http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0MNT/is_9_57/ai_107490410.

Anecdotal evidence can be found to support this claim. Professor Debra Meyerson of Simmons School of Management and Stanford University and Barbara Waugh at HP and have both found this to be true. Through her studies on “radical” elements (*i.e.* change agents) within organizations, Meyerson has found that radicals can effect change, but they must do so slowly so as not to disturb unduly the norm. She “calls such events ‘small wins’ and regards them as a central strategy for effective radicals. For one thing, the approach nicely reduces large problems to ones that are easier to manage.... ‘What these people do is push back and negotiate resistance. They test the system, subtly challenging norms. They prod gently, because that's all the system can take.’”⁴ In practice, in her role as personnel manager for HP Labs, Waugh

...makes change by making connections – a process that she calls “amplifying the positive deviants.... You seek out the positive deviants and support them. You feed them; you give them resources and visibility.... I grew up thinking that change was cataclysmic and probably accompanied by music. The way we’ve done it here is to start slow and work small. At some point, it begins to multiply, and you get transformation – almost before you realize it.”⁵

These observations from both academic study and practical experience point back to Quinn’s and Cameron’s assessments of positive deviance –it contains the potential for profound change, but it must be carried out slowly and carefully, enabling small gains toward a greater goal.

The basis for both positive deviance and “small wins” is to be found in behavioral psychology when we see that motivation and empowerment are fulfilled by concepts in

⁴ Debra Meyerson, Professor, Simmons Graduate School of Management and visiting professor, Stanford University; cited at <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/38/radicals.html>.

⁵ Barbara Waugh, Worldwide Personnel Manager, HP Labs; cited at <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/20/waugh.html>.

approaches to therapy. It is not by chance that so many authorities cited in the text *Developing Management Skills* are behavioral therapists or specialize in behavioral science. Specifically, the 20th century psychological approach Rational Emotive Therapy (later, Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, or Rational Behavior Therapy) developed by Albert Ellis (and later modified by Aaron Beck and Maxie Maultsby, Jr.) provides evidence of how “small wins” and positive deviance came to be developed by management specialists. This cognitive technique explains methods for treating neuroses, depression and stress in individuals; Robert Quinn pinpoints the way in which it works in an individual:

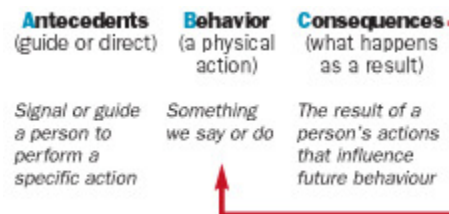
Over time, each of us develops a script, a story for our life. A parent may have told us we were ugly or beautiful. Our teachers told us certain things, our culture told us things. Consequently, through these scripts we learned to act in patterned ways.... These scripts we carry in our head may be called paradigms or mental models and are an important part of our comfort zone. Therefore, if I am to increase my capacity, I have to move outside my comfort zone, which means rewriting at least part of that script.... There’s nothing more terrifying because we prefer the devil we know to the devil we don’t know. But when we muster the courage to act on new scripts, amazing things happen. When people become empowered, they realize that they had put constraints upon themselves. Suddenly, they are able to do all kinds of things we previously thought were impossible.... We become empowered and empowering to [others] because we have demonstrated the courage to change our scripts, even though they probably would not use those words to describe what happened.⁶

Quinn’s “muster the courage” is really changing the “script” by way of “small wins.” This is a form of operant conditioning, which in itself is integral to motivation, specifically linking rewards and reinforcements to behaviors.⁷

⁶ Quinn, *op. cit.*

⁷ Whetten, D. & Cameron, K., *Developing Management Skills* (6th ed); Reading, MA: Addison Wesley Longman, 2005, p. 311.

At this point it is necessary to delve into these cognitive approaches to psychotherapy in order to see how they form the roots of these leadership practices. With greater understanding of this foundation, its application to organizations as well as individual therapy becomes clear. Aubrey Daniels' ABC analysis technique for connecting behavior with consequences and using that knowledge to maximize and reinforce desired behavior is a benchmark of management practices and motivation in organizations. The model⁸ is this:



The reaction is obvious: the more we practice a behavior, the more it becomes standard as it is reinforced by the consequences resulting from the behavior – thus the arrow leading back to behavior from consequences. This reinforcement (positive or negative) is a central feature of motivation in organizations.

This model, however, is extremely similar to models developed in behavioral therapy. In the mid 1950s Albert Ellis created his own ABC model of human beliefs. This model is purported to have made Rational Emotive Therapy the first comprehensive behavior therapy.⁹ The model is extremely similar to Daniels'¹⁰:

⁸ Representation of the Daniels ABC model at http://www.oionline.com/news/features/oe/20050826.Driving_.18911.asp.

⁹ Maultsby, M., & Wirga, M., "Behavior Therapy," Encyclopedia of Mental Health, Academic Press, 1998; at <http://www.arcobem.com/publications/Beh-Tx.htm>.

¹⁰ Representation of the Ellis ABC model at <http://counsellingresource.com/types/rational-emotive>.



Here, “A” is an activating event, prompting a reaction; “B” is the reacting person’s belief about that perception; “C” is the ensuing emotional and behavioral response to “A.” This is a model describing a person’s emotional reaction to his or her cognitive belief about an activating event, and then the resulting behavior from the emotional reaction to the activating event. It takes little to extrapolate from the emotions resulting from a personal belief system to the behavior prompted by an emotion. (Other models have been developed as modifications or substitutes to Ellis’ model, such as Beck’s Three Column Technique.¹¹) Just as “with our cognitions (B - thoughts, beliefs and attitudes) we create, maintain and eliminate all our emotional feelings (C) about events (A),¹²” so with changes in behavior we find motivation to make practical changes in our consequences. This is the link between Ellis’ ABC model and Daniels’ ABC model, and so forms the link from developments in rational emotive therapy to motivational technique in leadership development.

This also looks a back to issues of stress management as part of leadership development, as well. An anticipatory stressor has been defined as “potentially disagreeable events that threaten to occur – unpleasant things that have not yet happened, but might happen. Stress results from the anticipation or fear of the event.”¹³ We learn, however, to create stress about possible events through learning the “scripts” that Robert Quinn described

¹¹Beck’s Three Column Technique at <http://www.sonoma.edu/users/d/daniels/cognitive-behavioral.html>.

¹² Wirga, M., & De Bernardi, M., “The ABCs of Cognition, Emotion, and Action” at <http://www.arcobem.com/publications/ABC of Cognition.html>.

¹³ Whetten, D & Cameron, K, *op. cit.*

– punishment, extinction and especially negative reinforcement can all lead to the anticipation of possible grievance and stress becomes the emotional reaction. When this emotional reaction translates into behavior then motivation through “small wins” can help – the therapeutic echo of this can be found in techniques such as Donald Meichenbaum’s stress inoculation, in which four steps in coping with stress are outlined as preparing, confronting and coping, dealing with temporary difficulties, and assessing and self-reinforcement.¹⁴ This final step is crucial for both behavioral therapy and leadership skill development in that “self-reinforcement” is both a way to deal with unwanted emotional reaction and a way to self-motivate as part of a series of steps. We can learn how to deal with anticipatory stress through “small wins” – learning how to change expectations (thoughts), motivation (emotion), and thus performance (behavior). In rational emotive behavioral therapy terms it means changing “thought” – meaning changing expectations, or reducing anticipatory stress from what we “think will happen.” This then reinforces intrinsic motivation to repeat the healthy behavior, leading to repeated performance. Thought, emotion and behavior are all linked in this therapy, which is then reflected in the “small wins” approach with expectations, motivation and performance.

Daniels was aware of this connection: “We want everybody to understand the importance of positive reinforcement in all our interpersonal relationships. It’s just as important at work as it is at home.”¹⁵ In fact, he was responsive to the ground broken by behavioral therapy as his background as a clinical psychologist led to his innovation: “If positive consequences are the best way to change and improve behavior and elicit discretionary effort,

¹⁴ Meichenbaum’s technique outlined at <http://www.sonoma.edu/users/d/daniels/cognitive-behavioral.html>.

why don't businesses use this knowledge systematically?"¹⁶ And he was clear about his acknowledgement to the field that introduced him to these concepts:

You know, a lot of the *Dilbert* strips go over my head, but I use my all-time favorite in one of my seminars. The boss is giving a performance appraisal. He says, "I'll raise your appraisal from four to five if you eat a bug." The employee says, "What?" The boss says, "Eat a bug. How much clearer can I be?" Then the boss says, "I didn't have much luck with the other management techniques, so I'm kind of winging it now."

I think this is a big problem with management today and leadership in general, that a lot of people are winging it. What we're trying to say is, "Look, let's use what we know from the science of human behavior. Let's track it so we can see if this is going to work."¹⁷

Daniels' example of the manager in the *Dilbert* cartoon is telling: the manager says he doesn't have much luck with "management techniques," and not just motivation. This is where empowerment continues and supports motivation, since with empowerment much of a person's efficacy is found through an internal commitment, not an external requirement. An external "commitment" is, in fact, a burden: "a...psychological survival mechanism for many employees – it is a form of adaptive behavior that allows individuals to get by in most work environments."¹⁸ It is a burden not only in that the "adaptive behavior" comes from constant reinforcement and thus must be learned, but also because it reinforces the same unempowering message: "do your own thing – the way we tell you."¹⁹ Empowerment, therefore, is finding internal, not external, commitment. In behavioral therapy terms, internal commitment is the renewed "B," the renewed or re-reinforced acceptance of a different belief system, in which desired emotional reactions follow on desired cognitive, or rational,

¹⁵ Interview with Tom Peters at http://www.tompeters.com/cool_friends/content.php?note=008633.php.

¹⁶ Quote at <http://www.aubreydaniels.com/aboutUs/story.asp>.

¹⁷ Interview with Tom Peters, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Argyris, C., "Empowerment: The Emperor's New Clothes," cited in Siggers, R.; *Developing Leadership Skills Course Package*, p. 324).

responses. These steps, or possible actions, find reflection in theories of expectation by Albert Bandura, in which attribution about the reason for success is emphasized. Internal attribution leads to changed belief, which then shapes our emotional acceptance of certain behaviors, making future behavior healthier. Similar to this, or helpful to it, is the theory of “reframing,” or “cognitive restructuring.”²⁰

This empowerment then leads to another, though affiliated, concept. If empowerment is the internal commitment – or motivation – to re-reinforce, then from a behavioral therapeutic point of view it is not simply reprogramming, or changing a “script,” but a transition that a person makes as they transform “B” on both psychological and performance levels. Full empowerment, or internal commitment, requires changes to rational processes, emotional beliefs and behavioral routine. The importance of this transition ought not to be dismissed: in behavioral therapy terms, this change (or self-change) is centered on emotional development in which the individual goes through a process of revising his or her emotional belief system from negative to positive. “Usually, before people can make such a polar change, they have to go through a series of less and less negative emotions, neutral emotions, and then more and more positive emotions.”²¹ In terms of the emotional beliefs so central to rational emotive therapy (and, more generally, behavioral therapy), this is a clear reflection of the three stages of transition as described by William and Susan Mitchell Bridges, where “internal transition” is “a

¹⁹ Argyris, *ibid.*, p. 323.

²⁰ Descriptions of both Bandura’s theory of efficacy and outcome expectations and Communication theory’s “reframing” can be found at <http://www.sonoma.edu/users/d/daniels/cognitive-behavioral.html>.

²¹ Wirga, M., & De Bernardi, M., [op. cit.](#)

psychological reorientation that people have to go through before...change can work.”²² Their three stages, more colloquially described, are “Saying goodbye,” “Shifting into neutral” and “Moving forward.” Clearly, “Saying goodbye” requires abandoning unhealthy emotional responses and behavioral practices; “Shifting into neutral” is the “neutral emotions” of behavior therapy; and “Moving forward” requires embracing the “positive emotions” that make healthier and more effective behavior possible.²³ The result is simple to see, but astonishing in its implications. From a behavioral therapeutic approach, changing the ABC dynamic so that more beneficial emotional reactions ensue from activating events can then lead to improved and valuable behavior – and from there, the sky’s the limit. Improved motivation and reinforced internal commitment continue the journey, until even transformational leadership is possible. And all of this is the result of a process that has at its core nothing more than “small wins.” From a behavioral therapy approach, this affects the individual; adapted for leadership and management purposes it explains how and why entire organizations change – and why they continue to change even after the change agent has left the building. Debra Meyerson’s comments on how small changes are necessary so as not to disturb the managers now takes on a more far-reaching importance: “In starting small, [this employee] made immediate tangible progress and over time created a cascading process that not only made a meaningful difference by itself but helped set a context for change later on.”²⁴

²² Bridges, W. & Bridges, S.M., “Leading Transition,” cited in Saggars, R.; *Developing Leadership Skills Course Package*, p. 380).

²³ Bridges, *et al*, *ibid*.

²⁴ Meyerson, D., *Tempered Radicals: How People Use Difference to Inspire Change at Work* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2001), reprinted in part as “Small Wins – Big Changes,” at <http://hbswk.hbs.edu/item.jhtml?id=2538&t=organizations>.

In a very real sense, “small wins” uses a behavioral approach to change incrementally not only how an organization functions, but how it “thinks” and “feels.” This involves the most basic practices of internal departments and stems from a reconsideration of the values at play. It is self-leadership on an organizational level. This is the same process – the same journey – taken by individuals as they experience change brought about by individual behavioral therapy. The Bridges’ method for managing transition is a deeply individual practice and shows how profoundly similar the individual and managerial experiences can be; their explanation of the steps for managing transition is similar to the therapist’s need to guide an individual through the stages of personal change.²⁵ Their stages – and more specifically the “4 P’s” of step five – reflect behavioral procedure: the recognition that change is needed, the three phases of emotional change, and a “small wins” approach to help the individual get to where he or she is headed. Some aspects of transitional leadership such as modeling, rewarding and discipline may not have much of a place to play in individual behavioral therapy, but this is not the point; the managerial features of change leadership are based on a foundation of behavioral psychology.

In fact, it’s so basic that it gets back to the therapist’s idea that an individual has to want to change in order to change, that the seeds of change are already within the person. So despite the Bridges’ observations and advice and in keeping with Argyris’ suspicion of change programs²⁶ some notion of organizational change exists in which the change is already eager to break out from within. During the 1990s Jerry Sternin worked for Save the Children in Vietnam; he discovered that “the traditional model for social and organizational change doesn’t work. It

²⁵ Bridges, *et al*, *op. cit.* for this observation and the ensuing description of the five stages.

never has. You can't bring permanent solutions in from outside."²⁷ Sternin is now the director of the Positive Deviance Initiative in its quest to bring to development an approach based on the premise that solutions to community problems already exist within the community.²⁸

Business writer David Dorsey, in his examination of Sternin's work, commented further:

Maybe the problem is with the whole model for how change can actually happen. Maybe the problem is that you can't import change from the outside in. Instead, you have to find small, successful but "deviant" practices that are already working in the organization and amplify them. Maybe, just maybe, the answer is already alive in the organization – and change comes when you find it.²⁹

Find the need for change from within, identify what works and what is valued, seek out change from within, and then take steps to "amplify" the change – where once behavioral psychology pointed the way to transformational leadership practices, now leadership theory looks back from whence it came.

In closing I will take a personal moment to reference my own work. In discussing how the assessment-courage cycle reflects ongoing use of the Action-Observation-Reflection model to promote double-loop learning in my paper "Alternating Current" I, too, was indebted to behavioral therapy, but without knowing it. For me,

...assessment is for progress and fulfillment. It is only through assessment (reflection) on our practical courage (actions) that we can hope to adequately build the final block of our leadership skills. Action for its own sake can be destructive – instead we want action that targets future aims and fulfills future goals. It is only through enlightened assessment that action makes sense in the long-term and points the way forward in the short-term.³⁰

²⁶ Argyris, *op. cit.*

²⁷ Quote from "Positive Deviant," at <http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/41/sternin.html>.

²⁸ <http://www.positivedeviance.org/about.html>.

²⁹ Dorsey, D., "Positive Deviant," *op. cit.*

³⁰ Hunter, J., "Alternating Current – a Thought Paper on Leadership," 2005

From the individual to the organization and then back to the individual, who continues to contribute. From assessment come learning, motivation and goals; from courage come steps toward those goals, and this leads back to assessment. These cycles are the learning loop in the path to change,³¹ and that path to change just may owe its birth to behavioral therapy.

³¹ <http://tip.psychology.org/argyris.html>.