Change adoption: A guide to using behavioral science to *drive* organizational *change*

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Many organizations have experienced a drastic shift in workplace norms over the past few years. All that change can be hard for organizations – and individuals – to process. In the face of so much uncertainty, a thoughtful approach to change adoption can go a long way in helping your workforce adjust to a new set of practices, circumstances, and expectations. Change adoption strategies can help your company better prepare and support employees to respond to organizational change, but first, it's critical to understand some key principles of human behavior.

Behavioral science helps us understand how people make decisions and adopt new practices. Leaders can use these insights to create an optimal environment for employees during periods of change. However, it's important to remember that every organization is unique, and though trends can provide valuable guidance, there's no one-size-fits-all solution. Even individually, the factors that shape one employee's decision-making may vastly differ from another's, so understanding this spectrum of influence is critical for shaping new behaviors – and embedding them into the employee experience.

In this guide, we'll explore the fundamentals of behavior change and share techniques to help you drive successful change adoption at both the individual and organizational levels.

The importance of behavior *change* in an *evolving* world of work

We're all continuing to navigate massive change in how we live and work – and likely will be for the foreseeable future. For example, flexible work, a concept that has been hotly debated, abruptly became the new normal for millions of employees around the world. As the world opens up again, it'll be a big adjustment for everyone, whether your company chooses to adopt a fully-remote, hybrid, or full-time in-person model. Especially with physical and mental wellbeing at stake, the ability to adapt is crucial.

Change is hard, and organizations play a vital role in fostering change adoption in a way that sets teams up for success. Employees will naturally be wary whenever your organization introduces a new policy, system, or leader – even if there's a clear benefit. People need proper support to digest new information and time to adapt to the change. People leaders play a critical role in facilitating this process and preparing their teams for the journey.

Behavioral science provides us with a helpful framework for understanding what drives human behavior and defining what will be the most successful and effective change management tactics for your unique workforce.

Understanding behavior

Ultimately, how employees behave during their day-to-day has a significant impact on an organization's culture and bottom line. It affects compensation, learning and development, and the overall employee experience. For instance, managers often focus their feedback on the outcome, rather than coaching their teams on how to actually make these behavioral changes and build new habits. Large-scale organizational change starts with individual behavioral changes, and managers are the key to planting these seeds of change through coaching and development.

Here are five essential steps to effective change management:

1. **Clearly communicate your organization's desired behaviors**
   It's impossible to inspire changes in employee behavior without clear and continuous conversation. Managers often lack the training and resources to deliver effective feedback, and when they do give feedback, it tends to be seen as a one-off conversation rather than an opportunity for ongoing development.

   It may sound obvious, but it's critical to let employees know the behaviors you expect from them and the behaviors that you don't want to see in your workplace. Make sure to document these expectations and help individuals find ways to incorporate this feedback into their existing workflow. The more you create an open and safe space to talk about opportunities for improvement, the more likely you'll see a clear change in behavior across your team.

FIG 1. MODELING DESIRED BEHAVIORS

2. **Model the behaviors you want to see**

   Employees generally look to senior mentors and executive leadership for behavior cues. When people leaders model the behaviors they wish to see in their workforce, their teams naturally follow suit. In other words, employees are likely to adapt to the cultural norms modeled by leadership.

   HR teams can help facilitate organizational change with a top-down approach. You might use monthly leadership meetings to highlight areas of opportunity, and level set so that leaders are aligned when modeling desired behaviors they want to cascade out to individual contributors.

3. **Be observant: Tune into employee behavior**

   Every day, your employees exhibit behavioral cues. These cues can help you and your managers communicate with employees more effectively, enable you to provide better feedback, and build trust with your team. Without the right tools, managers may find it difficult to pinpoint specific behaviors and navigate feedback conversations. Encourage managers to use 1-on-1s to nurture their relationships with their direct reports and tune into the individual work and learning styles of their different team members.

4. **Reinforce the right behaviors**

   People will typically repeat behaviors that are acknowledged or rewarded. Recognition can be an effective tool in affirming and reinforcing behavior change. At times, you may even consider rewarding it, depending on the situation. For example, if you're trying to change a competitive culture into a more supportive team-oriented environment, you might incentivize employees to give kudos to their peers.

   On the flip side, when you want to see less of a certain behavior, encourage managers to provide direct, constructive, and useful feedback. Often, this may require foundational trainings to equip leadership with the skills and framework to effectively deliver constructive feedback.

FIG 2. LEADERSHIP SUPPORT

5. **Start from a place of empathy**

Behind every behavior, there is an underlying cause, motive, or feeling. While that doesn't always justify the behavior, it can help determine your response. If you understand what's driving the behavior, you can more effectively address it. Maybe it's insecurity, pressure, miscommunication, a personal problem, or even lack of knowledge.

When a manager understands and validates the "why" behind the behavior, they can frame their feedback in a way that considers the employee's feelings and circumstances. Managers are there to help employees course-correct, and honest, transparent conversations are the key to implementing true change.

As you dive deeper into this topic, think about behavior change like launching a rocket into space. While change adoption doesn't require an engineering degree, behavioral scientist Dan Ariely explains why this metaphor is helpful.

To launch a rocket into outer space, you need to do two things:
1. **Minimize any friction**
2. **Maximize your fuel**

Too much friction and the rocket won't fly; if there's not enough fuel, you'll face the same issue. The same holds true for behavior.

Next, we'll explore some ways to reduce friction and add fuel so that you can strike the right balance when changing behavior for all employees.

Reducing friction

Friction is everything that gets in the way of us performing a certain behavior. We experience friction when we're faced with difficult decisions, and it's a feeling most of us experience every day. Have you ever had to deliver feedback to a colleague yet felt uncertain about the outcome? Or spent an excessive amount of time crafting an email, tiptoeing around an issue?

These forms of emotional friction arise out of our thoughts and feelings and can become blockers to productivity. We're all subject to errors in our thinking, also known as "cognitive biases." There are many forms of bias, and we can use confirmation bias as an example. Confirmation bias is the tendency to search for or interpret new information in a way that confirms one's preexisting beliefs. Confirmation bias leads us to rationalize what we already think rather than challenging our thoughts with fresh perspectives. This (often unconscious) bias creates friction by acting as a barrier to new facts or subconsciously shutting down a different perspective.

A manager with a positive view of their direct reports will likely trust feedback from others that supports their personal opinion of their employee, but may dismiss or ignore feedback that contradicts these beliefs. We are naturally resistant to change because we subconsciously create neurological shortcuts to help us make decisions more quickly. While this is useful for survival, it is important to note these biases and make intentional efforts to stay open to alternative ways of thinking.

FIG 3. ADDRESSING BIASES
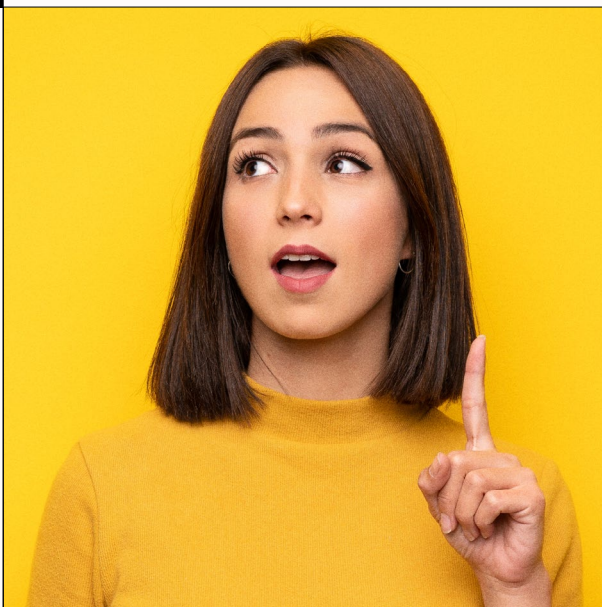
To better understand how thoughts can impact our receptivity to behavior change, we'll share some common contributors to friction in the workplace:

- **Information overload.** Being presented with too many new ideas or choices at once can leave employees feeling paralyzed or overwhelmed when it comes to decision-making. This is also known as "cognitive overload."

- **Social norms.** Consider what employees see the majority of their colleagues doing, as we tend to follow social cues for our behaviour. When others aren't implementing a change or doing the desired behavior, it can inhibit employees' willingness to change their own behavior.

- **Attention.** With so many things fighting for our attention at work (and in life) it can be challenging to get your message through. What may seem like resistance to change is often employees actually forgetting about the change desired.

- **Sunk costs.** When someone has invested time in doing something a certain way, it's often preferable, easier, and more comfortable to continue in that direction.

Reducing friction may feel simple, but proactively identifying and removing barriers will make it easier to get broader buy-in for a behavior change. Look for common sources of friction and address these first, being aware that there are often multiple at play. It might take some trial and error to uncover those that will have the biggest impact. The positive benefit to addressing points of friction is that they tend to be more universal compared to sources of fuel which can be highly individualized.

Increasing fuel

To launch the rocket, you not only have to minimize friction, but also add "fuel" by creating appeal around certain behaviors so employees feel more compelled to adopt them.

Motivation is a powerful "fuel source" and can be either extrinsic or intrinsic. In the world of work, we often focus on extrinsic motivation, like pay raises or bonuses. Traditionally these kinds of motivators are seen as the key drivers of employee satisfaction, but intrinsic rewards can have a more profound and longer-lasting impact on motivation and retention. When it comes to behavior, five core needs stand out:

1. **Meaning** - People are motivated when they think their job is meaningful.

2. **Progress** – People want to see the results or impact of their efforts and know that it ties back to a greater purpose.

3. **Connection** – People crave a sense of belonging and appreciation, which is why team-building activities can be so effective.

4. **Autonomy/agency** – People want to feel ownership in their role and like they're trusted to make decisions. This can be achieved through flexible working arrangements or the ability to refresh when needed.

5. **Growth** – People want to experience a sense of mastery and achievement, such as developing a skill.

Many forms of "fuel" in behavior change rely on one of these core drivers. Each employee will need a different combination of "fuel" to change their behavior. Certain individuals may find autonomy more relevant than connection, or value flexibility over public recognition. That's why it's essential to tailor your approach to account for your people's unique wants and desires.

Decision-making and *behavior*

Now that we understand the driving factors behind fuel and friction, we can dive deeper to understand how decisions are made, and why this is important for effective change management. To change behavior, we first need to understand how the decisions that lead to change are made. Though we often perceive decision-making as highly rational, up to 90% of our decisions are made subconsciously.

According to the work of psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, decision-making typically occurs in two distinct systems:

- **System 1,** is fast, intuitive, and responsible for subconscious decision-making.

- **System 2,** is slow, deliberate, and responsible for conscious decision-making.

It's worth noting that, in practice, the distinction between the two systems is not so clear-cut. Rather, both systems are symbiotic. When attempting to change behavior, you first need to understand how people make decisions and how to leverage these different systems to inform your change management strategy.

Changing the conscious mind

The conscious mind reacts to a situation with rational and logical thinking. The conscious mind can be seen as the tip of the iceberg, because it's the part of our mind that wants to eliminate emotion from the decision-making process and operate by objectively weighing the facts.

Below, we'll look at three levers to help drive behavior change at the conscious level:

Providing information
Simply providing your employees with information can be very effective in driving change. Economic theories suggest that individuals – when supplied with new information – will act to maximize the benefits and reduce any costs involved. However, as discussed above, rationality is never completely isolated from emotion. Cognitive errors and heuristics (mental shortcuts) lead to biases in our decision-making. Hence the impact of this change method is usually modest.

Goal setting
Goal setting is one of the most well-known techniques used to promote behavior change. One behavior change study focused on weight loss found that 35% of participants had utilized goal setting at some stage, making it the third most often used technique when targeting an increase in physical activity. Goal-setting is a crucial tactic for achieving behavior change, has been used in many different fields and environments – from education to health, and has proved to be an effective method for behavior change.

Coaching
A coaching mindset is essential to meaningful change. Managers should encourage their direct reports to view challenges as opportunities and strive for growth rather than merely seeking approval. When you empower managers with the tools to coach their direct reports, employees learn to pinpoint solutions that work for them. This ensures that individuals buy into the desired behavior change and play an active role in determining what needs to change and how to get there.

Changing the subconscious mind

Unlike the conscious mind, the subconscious mind is a repository for your underlying beliefs, past experiences, memories, and skills. Behavior change methods that involve the subconscious mind tend to require less effort. Thoughtful strategies that help the subconscious mind adapt to new behaviors can be a huge driver of meaningful change adoption.

Below, we'll explore three approaches to helping the subconscious adopt a new set of norms:

Nudges
Like a reminder, a nudge offers the brain a shortcut for making quick decisions with minimal information. Some nudges are more direct, like reminders and alerts, while others can be designed to guide and shape existing behaviors, like checklists. Nudges are a generally easy-to-implement way to boost employee productivity and wellbeing, and many culture first organizations are already embracing nudge research to better support their people.

Understanding the science behind nudges can be helpful when considering how to implement them in your organization. A nudge works to influence the context, timing, and presentation of choices behind behavior change. There are two different types of nudges: Choice default nudges and social proof nudges.

Choice defaults are preset actions that will take effect if nothing is specified by the decision-maker. This type of nudge is especially effective when uncertainty is present. For example, auto-enrolling your employees in a default benefits plan (if they fail to make a selection during open enrollment) helps ensure your employees don't end up without health insurance.

A social proof nudge feeds into our natural tendency to model our own behavior after others. This kind of nudge works best when people are uncertain or if the situation is ambiguous. For instance, if an organization is considering whether extended paid paternity leave should be part of their wellbeing strategy, seeing that other companies offer extended paid leave could nudge them with the social proof to make a similar decision.

Cues and reminders

Cues can act as a trigger (often a reminder) to do a certain behavior. Cues are most commonly used when trying to build or break habits. For example, including a specific emoji in a Slack message (such as a red question mark) could cue the group that you're looking for feedback. Breaks between meetings could be cues to check your emails or go for a walk – this depends on how deliberate you are with assigning desired behaviors to cues.

Social norms

Your company culture likely has a set of norms that employees observe, and these serve as cues for a particular type of behavior. To drive change adoption, it's important to embed new practices into your existing set of norms. For example, if your organization is moving towards a more continuous feedback model, you might encourage employees to give more public recognition so that it becomes the new norm.

Determining the most appropriate change adoption method depends on the unique culture of your organization. As a general rule, conscious behavior change methods are most effective when used with smaller groups or individuals as they develop their skills or take on more complex responsibilities. On the other hand, subconscious behavior changes are best used to promote widespread change across your organization.

Putting it into *practice*

Now that we've covered the principles of behavior change and techniques for driving change adoption, let's explore how to incorporate them into your existing processes.

A behavioral science roadmap

Using the following steps, you will be able to clearly identify the behaviors that are right for the outcomes you want to see, the areas where you may face resistance, and how to test and implement new processes.

The first step is to clearly identify your desired behavior. This should be a concrete behavior, not based upon emotions or opinions. Generally, a company's efforts to change behavior fail because they are not clear on what they want people to do, and as a result, they don't design for it. For example, 'make our employees love working here' might be your ideal outcome, but it lacks the foundational structure necessary for devising a change plan.

Next, after you've identified the ideal behavior, map out a clear process and your expectations. If you'd like your employees to book meeting rooms using a new process, clearly define the steps they'll need to follow, and establish norms that should be followed once the process is in place.

Third, identify possible points of friction, and consider potential sources of fuel. Keep the following questions in mind when building out your roadmap:

- How can you make it easier for people to adopt a new behavior?
- How can you create more appeal and/or make employees want to adopt this behavior?
- What practices have been effective with your workforce in previous instances of change?
- What's the context behind points of friction? What can be done to address them?
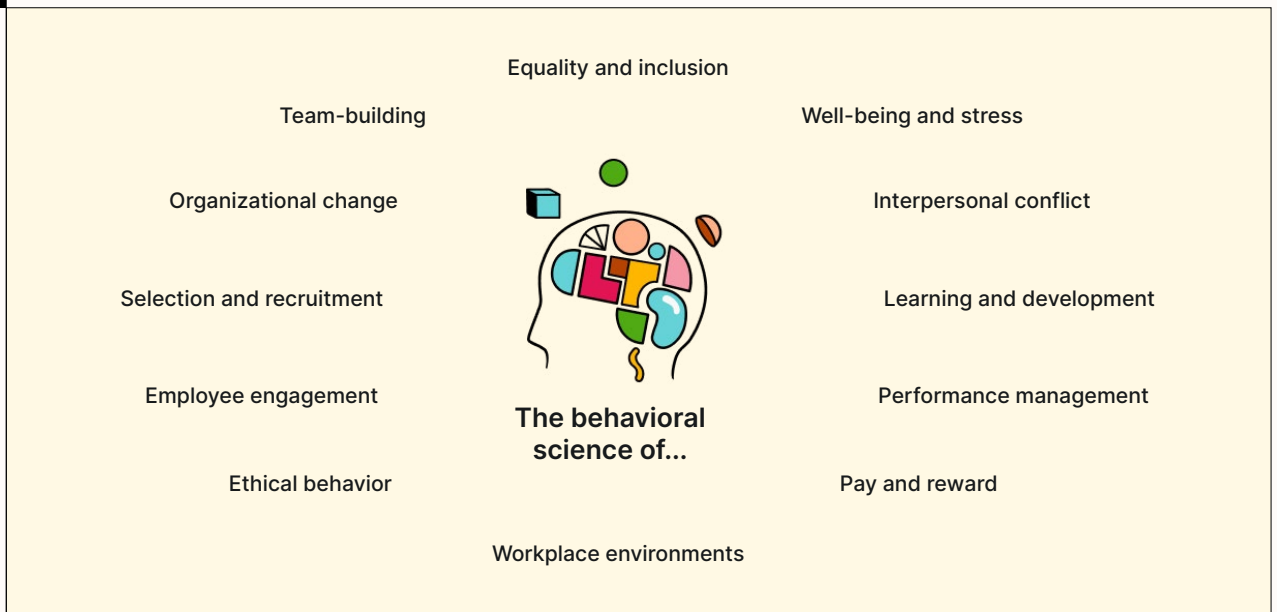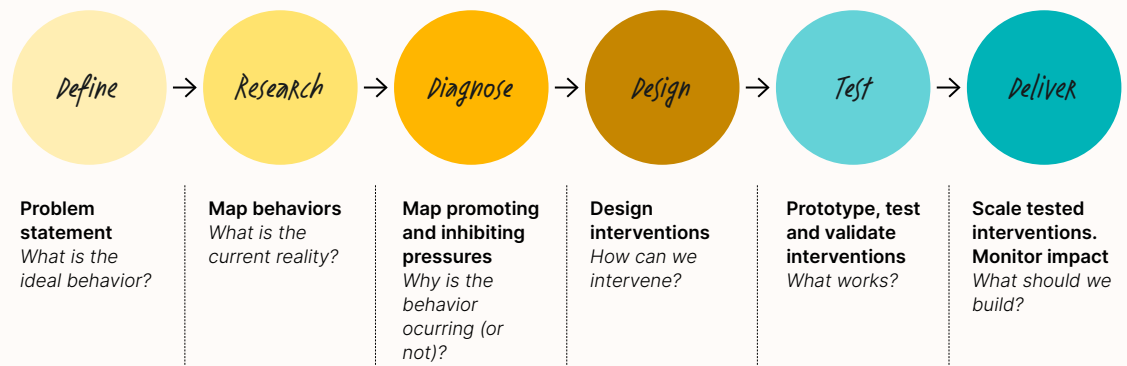
Fourth, using the behavioral tools listed in this guide, determine which tactics seem like they will have the most impact. Map out how you plan to put them into practice.

Finally, test. It's important to experiment to find the most effective methods for your organization. Test out various tactics, and gather feedback for further iterations.

With these steps in mind, you can track the success or challenges of change management over time and optimize your strategy.

FIG 4. BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE AREAS

Define →	Research →	Diagnose →	Design →	Test →	Deliver
Problem statement *What is the ideal behavior?*	**Map behaviors** *What is the current reality?*	**Map promoting and inhibiting pressures** *Why is the behavior occurring (or not)?*	**Design interventions** *How can we intervene?*	**Prototype, test and validate interventions** *What works?*	**Scale tested interventions. Monitor impact** *What should we build?*

Equality and inclusion

Team-building

Well-being and stress

Organizational change

Interpersonal conflict

Selection and recruitment

Learning and development

Employee engagement

Performance management

Ethical behavior

Pay and reward

The behavioral science of...

Workplace environments

Change *adoption* across the employee experience

In the following sections, we'll drill into specific areas of the employee experience where prompting change adoption can be challenging – but where it's also essential.

Performance management

Performance management presents many different opportunities for change management at both organization-wide and individual levels. Whether you're rethinking your performance management strategy or coaching an employee toward their career goals, understanding the principles of behavioral science will improve your change adoption process.

Building on the latter example, people leaders are in a unique position to empower managers to support individual team members in identifying what behaviors need developing and building an action plan. Setting clear goals, for instance, helps establish an agreed action plan. Managers can review goals together with their direct reports on a consistent basis to track progress, adjust goals, and provide support if necessary. Regular check-ins help keep growth on track.

Another approach to performance change management leverages unconscious change tactics such as environmental cues priming. For example, creating a space in the office without tables and with more comfortable chairs can prime more openness and reduce defensiveness during performance conversations – as it may help to break down physical and emotional barriers between managers and employees.

Culture Amp

Bias can present an organization-wide challenge when it comes to performance change management. It's important to work with managers on how to identify and overcome common performance management biases.

Learning and development

Similar to performance management, employee development is critical to supporting individual growth and broader business performance. Employees increasingly expect to see company investment in their professional growth, but many companies are falling short. To effectively drive change, your workforce needs access to the right tools and resources. Without that support, they may consider leaving. According to Culture Amp research, employees who don't feel they have access to clear development opportunities are 41% more likely to leave their current company.

Upskilling managers to provide constructive feedback and establish an easy and guided approach for conversations around career growth is a good place to start moving toward a more development-focused culture. This broader shift lays the foundation to identify individual growth opportunities, support action planning, and track progress over time.

Learn how Develop by Culture Amp empowers people leaders to streamline and optimize employee development planning.
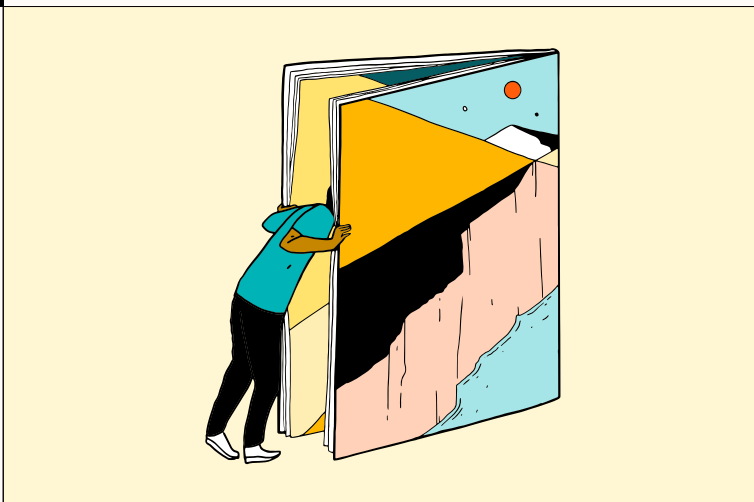
Employee wellbeing

Creating a culture of employee wellbeing is an ever-evolving process. At the subconscious level, using positive language around mental health in the workplace can improve psychological safety and [wellbeing](). If your company has normalized an "always on" culture, employees may feel the need to constantly work late or reply to messages during non-work hours. This kind of culture has significant negative impacts on an employee's mental wellbeing. Embedding nudges into your organization's communications can help empower employees to set boundaries.

The Boston Consulting Group (BCG), for example, has [implemented pop-up windows]() that appear when employees send emails to colleagues outside of their specified working hours. The pop-up window offers the sender options to either mark the email as low priority, defer sending until the next working day, send the email anyway, or cancel sending entirely. By doing so, BCG reminds their employees to switch off outside of work to avoid stress and anxiety.

Diversity, equity, & inclusion

Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is an area where many organizations are interested in making positive changes. Even companies with progressive policies seek ways to continue improving and evolving their practices.

While [DEI requires a strategic, robust approach](), there are several immediate steps that your organization can take to start making meaningful changes:

- Always use inclusive language in internal communications

- Configure bots in your internal communication tools (e.g., Slack) that promote inclusive language (e.g., "team" instead of "guys")

- Amplify role models that offer representation. This includes diversifying leadership and rotating hosts/speakers in team or company-wide meetings

- Make flexible work solutions the default rather than the exception

- Establish norms to create space for diverse voices and ideas in meetings

- Be transparent about DEI goals and own up when you fall short

Incorporating some of these steps into your existing DEI strategy will facilitate widespread change to create a more inclusive culture.

Employee feedback surveys

To better understand how employees feel at work, regular employee feedback surveys are critical to driving change and tracking progress. Access to this type of powerful data will help you develop an environment with equitable representation for all of your employees.

The value of feedback survey data depends on the level of employee participation. In order to increase survey participation, include nudges across the employee feedback journey. This can include pre- and post-survey communications, the sharing of results and subsequent action planning, and notifying managers that their reports are ready to be viewed. These nudges ensure consistent participation and maintain transparency between your organization and employees.

FIG 6. ENCOURAGE EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK

Ethical *considerations* and looking forward

Behavioral science acts as a powerful tool for promoting effective change across the employee experience. However, even subtle changes in an environment and the way information is framed can affect how we make decisions and alter our actions. Some of the methods we've explored have been called into question, including nudges. Critics have expressed ethical concerns that these methods are deceptive, manipulative, and interfere with individual free will.

When a leader aims to change behavior, they are encouraging – or even forcing – an employee to behave in a way that might not be natural. For example, forcing someone with a specialized set of skills to perform work outside of their responsibilities can cause them unnecessary stress or anxiety, even if it benefits your company in the short term. Change adoption tactics should aim to bring out the best in your employees.

FIG 7. GETTING STARTED
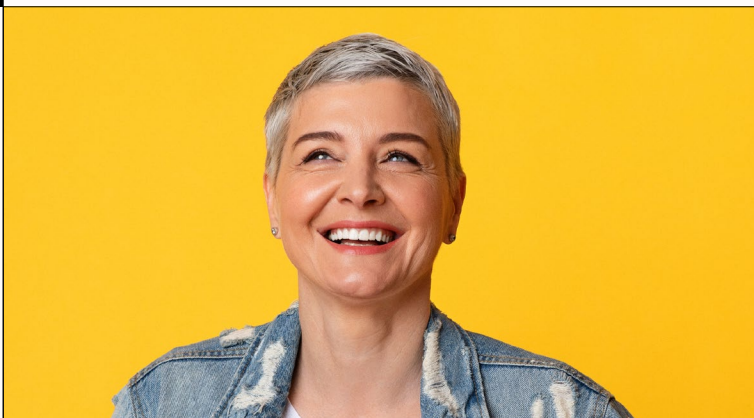
Even if you believe that your methods for behavior modification are fair, listen to employee perspectives. When introducing change management in your organization, be alert for the following missteps:

- **Excessive social pressure or shaming**
  Coercing instead of motivating

- **Changing a behavior without trying to understand it first**
  Creating solutions without effort to understand why they do/don't do it and what makes it hard to change

- **Promoting a behavior with unproven effectiveness**
  Guiding people to spend their time, resources, and energy on a behavior when there is no evidence that it will be beneficial

- **Promising more than the behavior can deliver**
  Overselling and/or hiding the costs or risks

- **Not checking for unintended consequences**
  Going all-in on an initiative without testing to understand impact

With great power comes great responsibility. These are powerful methods to help employees make better decisions and encourage positive behavior change.

FIG 8. LOOKING FORWARD

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Culture Amp

Change adoption starts with having the right tools in place. Culture Amp's centralized solution empowers people leaders with the tools to improve engagement, performance, and development.

Learn how

Culture Amp