

Organization Practice

The long haul: How leaders can shift mindsets and behaviors to reopen safely

The influence model is not only a template for organizational transformation but also a solid guide to crafting a sustainable response to the COVID-19 crisis.

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Responses to the coronavirus pandemic have demonstrated that people can rapidly change their behaviors during the acute phase of a crisis—for example, through high initial compliance with lockdowns and large-scale shifts to working from home. However, sustaining those changes for a prolonged period is more difficult.

COVID-19 will be with us for many months, perhaps years, to come. Societies face the challenge of resuming as many normal activities as possible while preventing a resurgence in the number of cases. To do so, they need strategies to sustain changes in behavior, such as the use of face masks and physical distancing, over time. Recommended behaviors will continue to emerge as new scientific evidence surfaces. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres put it, “None of us is safe until all of us are safe.”

Much has been written about actions that countries and companies can take to fight virus spread and reopen safely. But government edicts and corporate policies depend on human behavior to be effective. Our research into organizational change shows that compliance isn't always the greatest motivator. We believe that instead of relying on compliance and enforcement, leaders now have an opportunity to shift to addressing the underlying thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that ultimately determine whether people will change. Getting “underneath the iceberg” of what motivates individuals to act is crucial to managing the COVID-19 crisis.

Enter the influence model, which has four interrelated and evidence-based practices to drive mindset and behavior change: offering clear and consistent messaging to foster better understanding of the coronavirus, using formal mechanisms to shape safe behavior, teaching practical skills to instill confidence, and leveraging role models who reinforce new norms. Decision makers can use the influence model at scale to promote public health, employee safety, and customer confidence for the long term.

Applying the model: Public health and the workplace

Large-scale organizational change has always been difficult, and that has been truer than ever during the pandemic. Companies must react quickly to external shocks, supply-chain changes, shifts in the marketplace and their core businesses, employee health and safety, and other factors. Countries must keep people safe *and* reopen economies.

Research has shown that one of the primary blocks to sustainable change can be traced to limiting mindsets, which fall into the categories of “I am not allowed,” “I can't,” or “I won't.” Mindsets underlie behaviors, which lead to outcomes (see sidebar, “Why changing behavior is like playing whack-a-mole”). The influence model can guide organizations through comprehensive transformations by addressing those underlying mindsets. It consists of four elements that work best in concert (Exhibit 1):

- understanding and conviction
- reinforcement with formal mechanisms
- confidence and skill building
- role modeling

In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, decision makers can implement the four elements of the influence model to address broader societal and public-health issues.

Understanding and conviction

We know from research that human beings strive for congruence between their beliefs and their actions, experiencing discomfort when they are misaligned.¹ Believing in the “why” behind a change can therefore inspire people to change their behaviors. In practice, however, we find that many leaders incorrectly assume that the reason is obvious or universal—and so fail to communicate it sufficiently or at all.

¹ Leon Festinger, *A theory of cognitive dissonance*, second edition, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957

Exhibit 1

Organizations that successfully undergo change address all four elements of the influence model.



“Why” messaging during the crisis is an important opportunity, but it has a mixed record. Some early information came across as inconsistent, constantly changing, or even alarmist. Many people reacted negatively to that confused messaging.

Leaders can take the following actions to implement understanding and conviction during the COVID-19 crisis:

- **Be transparent and timely.** Openly acknowledge where early messaging was inconsistent. Emphasize that it reflected what officials understood of the coronavirus at the time, that understanding has greatly improved since then, how it has improved, and that it may continue to evolve. As new evidence emerges, communicate the updates in a timely fashion.

For example, countries used a variety of lockdown measures to prevent the spread of

COVID-19. Citizens noticed the differences, and some grew suspicious that the rules they were asked to follow might not be the “right” ones. Spain forbade people from leaving the house to exercise, while the United Kingdom permitted people to go out for walks. Distancing rules also varied. Many states in the United States coordinated their responses on a statewide level or as part of regional coalitions. Others initially delegated decision making to individual counties, so if one county was open for business while nearby counties were closed, people would drive to the open county to visit bars and restaurants, presumably affecting rates of virus transmission.

The good news is that when adopted broadly throughout communities, behavioral shifts such as increasing physical distancing, regularly washing hands, and wearing facemasks appear to have contributed to the initial control of

Why changing behavior is like playing whack-a-mole

Organizations trying to change behavior often feel like they are playing a game of whack-a-mole: implementing programs to change behavior only to find that same behavior popping up again. The key to successful change is to uncover the drivers of the undesirable behavior (exhibit). If those beliefs are not unearthed, questioned, and shifted, behavioral change rarely sticks.

We found three primary categories that hinder behavior change:

- belief that one *isn't allowed* to engage in a particular behavior, because it isn't part of one's job nor "how we do things

around here" (others don't do it, and no mechanisms exist for it)

- belief that one *can't* engage in a particular behavior because of a lack of time, resources, or skills
- belief that one *won't* engage in a particular behavior because the behavior is incongruent with one's goals or values or will negatively affect social standing or relationships with others

In our organizational work, we have seen a significant variation in employee goals and

constraints, even for those on the same team and in similar roles and tenure groups. That variation is instructive for leaders, who may consider more granular approaches to understanding and addressing individuals within the broader organization so they can create change.

Companies that did no work on diagnosing mindsets never rated their change programs as extremely successful. But companies that took the time to identify deep-seated mindsets were four times more likely than those that didn't to rate their change programs as successful.

Exhibit

Tailored approaches focus on the mindsets that prevent people from altering their behavior.

Common mindset blockages

I'm not allowed, because of

- Role
- History

I can't, because of

- Time
- Resources
- Skills

I won't, because of

- Goals
- Social standing
- Relationships
- Identity

virus spread in some locations. While we can't fully assess the impact of individual behaviors, geographies such as Germany, Hong Kong, Iceland, Japan, and Taiwan all successfully promoted changes in health behavior and were able to reduce (or maintain at a low level) the number of COVID-19 cases.

- **Consider reframing a message.** Why would an otherwise well-intentioned person not engage in behavior that is seemingly obvious? People struggle to act on facts that don't align with their frames of reference. Young people often find it difficult to comprehend their mortality. Many people fail to grasp the concept of exponential

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growth, having never encountered it outside of math class. Getting individuals to change behaviors may require reframing the message to one that is meaningful and specific to them.

In the pandemic context, some people react negatively to lockdowns as actions that seem to be taking away freedoms and shutting down economic activity. For certain segments of the population, reframing messaging from “restrict my freedom” (which people will fight) to “help me save the economy” or “help my family return to normal” (which few will oppose) might be helpful.

- **Have a credible messenger.** When Washington State emerged as one of the early COVID-19 hot spots in the United States, scientists, not politicians, delivered clear and comprehensive messages about the coronavirus. This aligned with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s *The CDC Field Epidemiology Manual* (Oxford University Press, 2019), which discusses how scientific experts should communicate with the public by being transparent and empathetic. The manual also cautions that they must “not over-reassure or overpromise.”² For organizations, that may mean having senior leaders publicly partner with a scientific advisor and share updates in consultation with that advisor. Senior leaders may also transparently acknowledge that their decisions are tied to data.

- **Appeal to different sources of meaning.** The compelling “why” for one individual may not resonate with another person. Our research has shown that employees derive meaning across five sources: having a positive impact on *society*, wanting the best for their *organizations*, providing superior service for their *customers*, having positive relationships with their *teams*, and reaching their *personal* development goals. Leaders have an opportunity to tell five stories at once regarding why safety precautions matter to each group, reaching a wider audience.

Reinforcement with formal mechanisms

The reinforcement lever is often misunderstood as a novel way of enforcing compliance. While formal reinforcement mechanisms include policies and regulations, they also make it easier to do the right thing by removing barriers and providing positive reinforcement (versus punishing for doing the wrong thing). That is in line with what has been widely studied in behavioral psychology: associations and consequences shape behavior.³

Leaders can take the following actions to implement reinforcement:

- **Nudge people to do the right thing.** In crowded and closed spaces (such as subways and stores), it makes sense to deny entry to people without a mask. But to nudge people into safer behavior, consider providing single-use masks to those who did not bring their own, installing hand

² Charles Duhigg, “Seattle’s leaders let scientists take the lead. New York’s did not,” *New Yorker*, April 26, 2020, newyorker.com.

³ B. F. Skinner, *The Behavior of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis*, London, UK: Appleton-Century, 1938.

sanitizers at entryways, and painting or adding stickers where lines form to mark six-foot spacing. Good nudging is not nagging: it's about choice, easy to follow, and personal.

- **Leverage existing infrastructure.** Community centers, grocery stores, government offices, and places of worship are great channels for distributing masks. Many companies have sent employees cloth masks for themselves and their families, and universities that are reopening have sent returning students kits with masks, wipes, and other health-safety items.
- **Provide positive reinforcement, with data transparency.** People are receiving information about COVID-19 from all sides. Simplifying it—for example, by showing incremental case counts and total case counts paired with mobility data—may provide enough information for people to be confident that their contributions are effective and being recognized.

Confidence and skill building

Confidence and skill building come down to ensuring that people have the information and skills required to do things differently—and feel able to do so. When individuals are confident in their ability to change, they can create a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Leaders can take the following actions to implement confidence and skill building:

- **Incorporate education.** Emphasize how individuals can protect themselves and others. Simple lessons, such as on how to adjust a mask so that it fits well and what physical distancing entails, are already in place. More targeted measures personalized to specific environments, such as on how to hold a shop-floor briefing and how to interact with customers, may help as well. Continue to emphasize them through multiple channels, including posters, emails, bite-size lessons, and more.

- **Provide the guardrails to make informed decisions.** For manufacturing, build in hand-washing breaks and other actions to augment a safety culture. Line-led training can allow individuals to handle unforeseen situations. For example, a logistics company saw that workers weren't wearing masks in a warehouse. Further conversations revealed that employees found the environment too hot to wear masks full time. The solution was to have employees wear masks when stacking boxes in a group but to relax the mandate when they were moving around in vehicles or on ladders, where they were, by definition, at a distance from others.
- **Build interpersonal competencies to set up employees for success.** Employees in customer-facing situations can be provided training on how to interact and de-escalate situations in which customers are unwilling to wear masks and how to observe safe behavioral norms.
- **Use simple and memorable language.** Japan's "three Cs" (avoid close contact, crowded areas, and closed spaces) is a simple yet effective message that leaves room for individual judgment and promotes education as the situation changes.

Role modeling

People mimic and learn—both consciously and subconsciously—from the individuals and groups that surround them. One of the best ways to drive the adoption of new behaviors is by ensuring that the people who individuals trust most are modeling the appropriate behaviors. Marketing professionals have known for years that what might resonate with one population won't with another. A local sports star who endorses a product will likely elicit a different reaction if that endorsement is played in a rival city. The same is true across populations during the COVID-19 crisis.

Leaders can take the following actions to implement role modeling:

- ***Wear masks and practice physical distancing.*** When interacting with other leaders or with the public, such role modeling is essential. For example, some public officials, despite their earlier skepticism, have begun wearing masks in public.
- ***Amplify influential voices that promote safe behaviors.*** Share stories of influential people voluntarily quarantining after testing positive for COVID-19 or coming into contact with a person who has it. Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson drew praise for self-quarantining in Australia after they tested positive for COVID-19. Organizations with strong branding power, such as sports teams, may consider lending their brands to promote safe masking.

- ***Use symbolism to signal the importance of safety behaviors.*** Earlier in the pandemic, many leaders engaged in symbolic acts, such as giving up their salaries and donating their bonuses to charities that fight COVID-19. Regarding safety, many industrial and mining companies, for example, often incorporate “safety moments” as a mandatory first agenda item of meetings. In that spirit, leaders might consider a new ritual that in-person meetings start only when everyone is masked.

Tailoring the model: Individuals and groups

The influence model’s four levers are most effective when they are deployed together and customized to individuals or groups. For instance, government leaders and public-health officials can tailor the four elements differently, depending on whether people have dependents living with them or not (Exhibit 2).

Exhibit 2

On a societal level, leaders’ messaging and actions can diverge based on audience.

4 levers of influence by audience

	With dependents	Without dependents
1 Understanding and conviction	Containing coronavirus will create a safer future for our children	This is how you can enjoy your life in the long term: by living safely today
2 Reinforcement with formal mechanisms	Access to childcare facilities requires masking	Access to mass transit requires masking
3 Confidence and skill building	Emphasis on how to protect vulnerable populations specifically	Emphasis on individual behavior and how to prevent virus spread
4 Role modeling	Schools, teachers, and childcare facilities	Government leaders and celebrity influencers

Approaches that are segmented to employee experience have a better chance of succeeding.

Employers have even more ability to tailor the influence model to ensure that their employees feel it is safe to return to work—and perhaps even provide comfort to customers. Companies discovered that opportunity as remote working took hold: some people are responding better to working from home than others, and approaches that are segmented to employee experience have a better chance of succeeding (Exhibit 3).

A recent campaign to reduce the use of handheld cell phones while driving is a good example of how the four levers of the influence model can come together to change behaviors. The outcome was a dramatic drop in the use of handheld cell phones by

drivers, particularly those aged 16 to 24, between 2009 and 2018 (Exhibit 4).

We all look forward to the day when we can, as much as possible, resume our normal lives. But the COVID-19 pandemic is a medium-term reality rather than a short-term challenge. We have learned a great deal about the coronavirus and how to reduce the risk of transmission. Applying the influence model can help drive the adoption of safe behaviors that light the way to the end of the tunnel.

Exhibit 3

Employers can segment their messaging and actions to workforces by level, role, and geography.

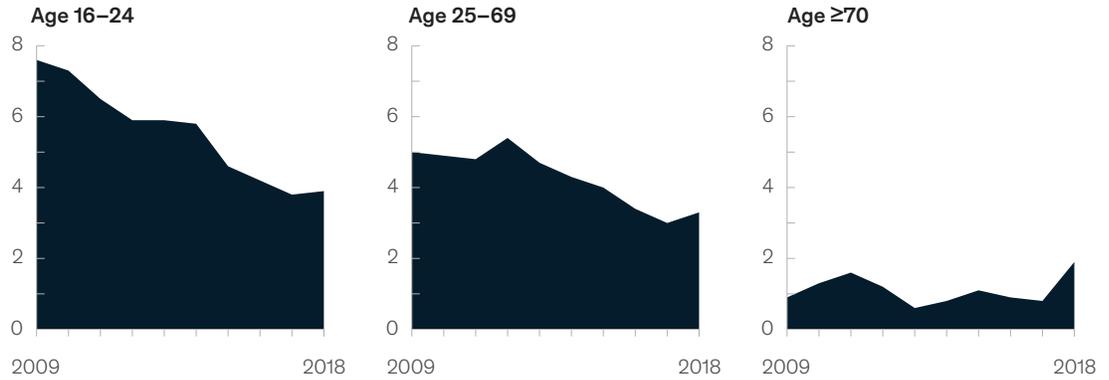
4 levers of influence by worker type

	Office workers	Production workers
1 Understanding and conviction	Why practicing physical distancing in office matters for productivity/performance	Why engaging in safe behaviors will lead to better end products for customers
2 Reinforcement with formal mechanisms	Meetings only start when everyone is masked	Build into safety culture (eg, “XXX days since last infection” signboards)
3 Confidence and skill building	Quick-bite virtual training focused on how coronavirus spreads and when exceptions can be made (eg, sitting alone in office)	Targeted training on how to practice safe behaviors in a line environment (eg, how to hold a shop-floor briefing)
4 Role modeling	Individual managers (in cascaded fashion)	Shift supervisors and union officials

Exhibit 4

The influence model's four elements helped change driver behavior over nearly a decade.

Driver use of handheld cell phones in 2009–18 by age, %



Timeline of driver-behavior change by influence-model-element type

- Fostering understanding and conviction
- Role modeling
- Reinforcement with formal mechanisms
- Confidence and skill building

- 2001: first hands-free Bluetooth technology appears in cars
- 2007: Washington becomes first state to ban driver texting (currently 48 states, Guam, Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, and Washington, DC, ban driver texting)
- 2010: Oprah Winfrey introduces No Phone Zone program for cars
- 2010: AT&T launches “It can wait” campaign
- 2012: *Glee* cast member featured on public-service announcement about distracted driving; *Glee* cast endorses No Phone Zone
- 2012: Justin Bieber partners with PhoneGuard Drive Safe software to discourage use of handheld cell phones while driving
- 2013: apps to prevent distracted driving (eg, LifeSaver) founded
- 2013: New York uses signs indicating “text stops” on highways
- 2013: “2-second rule” guideline created
- 2014: “I’m a text-pert” YouTube rap battle launched, with >19 million views
- 2017: Apple introduces “do not disturb” driving feature
- 2019: This App Saves Lives app, which rewards drivers for not using their phones, created

Source: US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

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