

Solving public problems through behavioral science

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Governments in the Gulf Cooperation Council can influence individuals and groups to address persistent issues including youth unemployment, chronic health problems, and unsustainable water use.

Senior government leaders must learn to influence people broadly, motivating and inspiring change in the population as a whole. In the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), many governmental ambitions will only be realized if substantial, population-wide behavioral changes take place. Among the typical challenges are these:

- As youth unemployment is on the rise in the GCC, how can a country inspire its youth to become more productive and engaged citizens?
- With a 19 to 24 percent diabetes prevalence in GCC countries, how can citizens be encouraged to adopt healthier lifestyles or comply with essential medical treatments?
- With water use per capita twice that of the global average in selected GCC countries, what would motivate families to be more environmentally conscious and reduce their consumption of water?

Recent advances in neuroscience indicate that each of these questions can be addressed through innovation and a methodological approach to behavioral change. In this article, we describe a technique for changing behaviors and mind-sets at a population level. Our methodology is built on an extensive review of neuroscience and behavioral literature from the past decade and is designed to distill the scientific insights most relevant for governments, not for profits, and business leaders. We also describe how mind-sets, attitudes, unconscious biases, ingrained beliefs, and behaviors are shaped in individuals and institutions, and how they can collectively be addressed by governments to drive measureable and sustained innovation.

The science-based approach to mind-sets and behavioral change

A five-step methodology uses the latest scientific insights to effectively influence both individual and group mind-sets and behaviors.

1. **Be ambitious and consistently articulate the case for change.** Any behavioral change effort must be grounded in a clearly articulated ambition and contain a strong rationale for the

change. From the very beginning, leaders must be concrete about the final outcome they would like to achieve and why behavioral change will be essential to achieving their dream.

2. **Know your people.** In any population, there are certain subgroups (or segments) where small changes can have a dramatic influence on the final outcome. These subgroups can be identified through an analytical segmentation approach that examines such elements as personality, behaviors, mind-sets, and socioeconomic factors. Deeper analysis into the critical segments reveals the key influencers, unconscious biases, and risk factors that are unique to each one. These provide an excellent picture of which individuals should be targeted to trigger change.
3. **Tap into ‘moments of truth.’** Moments of truth are discrete points in time where the choices people make will strongly influence the desired outcome. These decisions differ based on population segment and can be best identified by following an individual through a life cycle or experiential journey. After pinpointing the core moments of truth, it is important to be specific about the concrete behavior one wants to trigger at each moment and to understand the underlying mind-sets that will influence this behavior.
4. **Target your interventions.** The next step is to select a package of actions, interventions, and enablers for each priority segment, one that will help shift behaviors for each critical choice. When choosing interventions, we follow a systems approach, which goes beyond individuals and includes influencers and the ecosystem overall. One particularly helpful way to ensure that interventions are going to be effective is to consider the four elements of McKinsey’s influence model, which examines the crucial areas interventions need to tackle in order to sustainably change behaviors. These include role modeling, the population’s understanding and conviction around the change, the talent and skills required, and the formal reinforcement mechanisms.
5. **Size the prize.** For each package of interventions, one should also estimate the social return on investment (SROI) that those measures will have in comparison to the budget required to make them happen.

Illustrating the approach

To bring this methodology to life, let’s return to one of the core questions facing many GCC governments today: how can a country inspire its youth to become more productive and engaged citizens?

This is a big ambition. When engaged and employed youth change the entire direction of a country, motivation skyrockets, innovation flourishes, and country competitiveness takes off. Often, stability increases, and the virtuous cycle of societal development sets in. To kick-start this virtuous cycle, one must deeply understand the target population (in this case, Arab youth). McKinsey’s research on the education-to-employment journey youth take in the Arab world distilled seven separate youth segments through a segmentation approach based on attitudes and behaviors. The segments range from “too cool” to “disheartened” to “driven” (exhibit).¹

¹ Dominic Barton, Diana Farrell, and Mona Mourshed, “Education to employment: Designing a system that works,” January 2013, McKinsey.com, and “Education for employment: Realizing Arab youth potential,” *McKinsey on Society*, April 2011, McKinsey.com.

Exhibit

Seven distinct youth segments exist.



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This behavioral segmentation is used to prioritize the population segments that have the most potential to influence wide-scale change. It then serves as an anchor to define the specific choices, or moments of truth, that are influential in triggering desired behaviors. Although each country or sector will need to identify the segments that will be most influential in driving change in their unique context, we will use examples from two segments that have been influential in previous population-wide youth-engagement change programs.

Ahmed is a classic example of a member of the "disengaged" segment. He is 19 and recently graduated high school. School seemed somewhat pointless to him, and he was unmotivated to do more than the minimum in classes. It took him nearly a year to find a job after graduation. Three months into this job, he is highly disappointed with his work and remains convinced high school was a waste of time.

Sara is typical of the "disheartened" segment. She is 21 and frustrated because she believes that her economic background and gender have largely determined her career opportunities. When she was younger, she had big dreams, and she has considered going back to school to become an accountant. However, she is too disillusioned with the system to try and is resigned to the idea that getting a better education probably wouldn't make a difference for someone like her.

Even a quick glance at Ahmed and Sara reveals that their life experiences—and the choices they make in moments of truth—have been and will be different. There is a clear need to change Ahmed’s perspective on the value of education, help him learn about different paths (such as technical education), and demonstrate the value of these paths (for example, the fact that certain technical fields have very high job-placement rates). Given his underlying beliefs, general career services would be unlikely to influence him. He would have to act against his beliefs and become motivated to seek out a new path. This segment could probably be reached best by one-on-one outreach, an admittedly expensive, nonsalable intervention; or by forming social groups of individuals that they consider peers and influencers. These groups could help foster and positively influence Ahmed’s sense of identity and belongingness, and a peer coach could more powerfully introduce alternative options in a more sustainable way.

Sara is similar to Ahmed in the sense that she cannot be easily reached by information from the system. This is because the ingrained belief and unconscious bias that someone like her will never succeed lies at the core of many of her decisions.

Sara’s mind-set is known as a fixed mind-set because she believes her basic abilities, her intelligence, and her talents are just fixed traits. One intervention that likely could reach Sara would be to show her people like herself—nonwealthy, publicly educated, and female—who have achieved success, and describe how they had to face and overcome obstacles. This would be just one of several techniques that could address the unconscious biases and engrained beliefs she faces.

In both of these examples, we see the importance of drawing on scientific insights to understand and promote the underlying mind-sets that make behavioral change more likely. In general, the mind-sets that have been shown to be influential in becoming a more productive and engaged citizen are the ones we call “ownership,” “growth,” “grit,” “belongingness,” and the “belief in service to the community” mind-sets.

While we have given a few examples of interventions, a full behavioral-change effort adopts a more stringent approach when identifying the precise package of interventions for each segment. It ensures that all elements of the influence model are woven into the overall solution.

Based on extensive previous research and change programs in various governments and organizations, we have also defined a library of interventions that share the following characteristics:

- They can be effectively applied almost at any age of the target group.
- They achieve impact quickly.
- They can be applied to a significant population size or segment.
- They are all scientifically proven.

Finally, for each package of interventions, one can estimate the SROI (that is, the estimated effect of making the desired choice in each moment of truth), measured by factors such as whether a segment of the unemployed returned to the workforce and the budget required to implement the interventions. In addition to the effects on the labor market, the estimates will also address other elements of social betterment, for example, the effects on health or the country's stability.

We are confident that by combining the power of neuroscience with the rigor of management science, that significant strides can be made from youth engagement to healthy living and beyond. □

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