



# Ten Steps to Changing Employee Behaviour



**John Mulholland**  
Director, Mulholland Energy Solutions

Two years ago a blog caught my eye, *Sustainability by Stealth – 8 steps to heaven* by David Pencheon, Director of the NHS Sustainable Development Unit. He based it on a paper by Dror Etzion, at McGill University called: *Sustainability by Stealth: four ways to make sustainability more attractive*.

Both authors implicitly address an important question: “How do we effectively communicate sustainability for lasting change?” The answers are rarely what we think. David Pencheon took the original four steps and expanded them to eight. I have added two of my own and some illustrations from my experience addressing behavioural issues in large organisations over the last 25 years.

The 10 steps are:

## **1. Engage people by asking questions and listening**

Hectoring, finger-wagging and inducing guilt rarely achieve their goal. In fact we often switch off and do exactly the opposite. We reject both the message and the messenger. Whereas listening implies genuine interest and desire to find common ground. A good listener asks good questions that are open and searching. Also listening gives us useful insights on motivation, barriers and opportunities.



## **2. Be positive about the future**

The predicted effect of climate change, shortages and diversity losses predicted for the next 40 years can be depressing. But the apocalyptic approach on a global scale is likely to produce paralysis and despair, rather than action. As Pencheon notes: “Martin Luther King did not say: “I have a nightmare””.

## **3. Avoid the long term**

Long term planning is important e.g. the Government’s target to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 80% by 2050, but in communicating sustainability we need to bring things into the present and the near future. A University in Scotland has a vision of becoming carbon neutral by 2016. This is specific, attainable and inspiring. A target 36 years from now is hard to visualise or get excited about.

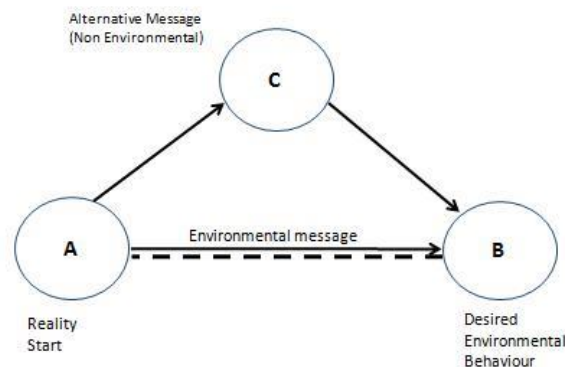
#### 4. Don't rely on reason alone

A reliance on reason and logic alone to induce behaviour change is dangerous. As humans, our decisions and judgements are less based on logic and values (as we would like to think) and more on emotions and flawed interpretation of data and reality.

Nobel Prize Winner, Daniel Kahneman, addresses some of these issues in his book *Thinking: Fast and Slow*. Kahneman refers to two ways of decision-making: System 1 – intuition/instinct as a means of making many of our daily decisions. System 2 is the slower, logical and rational approach. Messaging often assumes employees engage System 2, but more often than not System 1 is employed. This partially explains employees' wasteful behaviour when it is illogical.

#### 5. Apply the principle of Obliquity

Very often, challenging goals can be best achieved **indirectly**. The principle of indirection has been known for many years but popularised more recently by John Kay's book *Obliquity*. Conventional environmental messages achieve some success in achieving change but are not always the most effective. Goldstein, Martin and Caldini in *Yes!: 50 Scientifically Proven Ways to be Persuasive* reports the results of controlled experiments regarding re-using towels in hotels. By changing the environmental message to: "Did you know the majority of guests in this hotel reuse their towels if staying for more than one night?", the reuse rate increased by 26%. People tend towards being mainstream. Hence going from A to B via C can be faster and more effective. The oblique angle at C gives rise to the principle's name.



#### 6. Find out what motivates people at a personal level

I was once called to hotel where the chef had made significant energy and water savings in the catering department. Gas consumption was down 41% and electricity down by 24% through increased staff awareness. The chef, Carlos, said that neither cost reduction nor environmental factors were his motivation. When I asked him to explain he replied that the training had cut gas wastage, so the kitchen was cooler, resulting in tempers being less frayed, fewer plates flying, creating better teamwork, lower staff turnover, and better quality of food. Furthermore Carlos had been asking for two new combi ovens for three years and because the sub-metering proved his savings, management prioritised his investment. Each oven was 50% more energy efficient. Everyone wins. Carlos was pro-energy saving because it made his life easier - another example of obliquity.



Sometimes saving energy has unintended consequences as here. The challenge is to identify some of these benefits before they happen.

### 7. Make sustainable choices easier



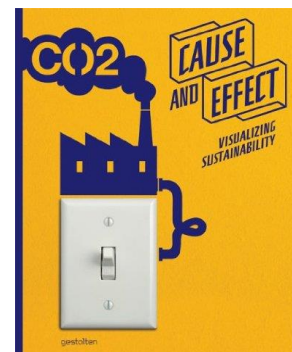
A Local Authority invested in 20 new electric pool cars and wondered how they could persuade employees to use these in preference to the existing diesel fleet. To their surprise staff chose the electric option anyway. It transpired that the electric cars were more spacious with better acceleration. Unwittingly the more sustainable option was made easier.

### 8. Make it fun

Making it fun encourages the desired behaviour. A London 5 star hotel chain measures environmental performance, and the best performing hotels are given recognition and reward. The staff enjoy the competition and social element, plus they feel appreciated for their efforts.

### 9. Make it visual

Each day we receive around 10,000 units of information and only 1% is retained, but pictures and images help us remember. In *Cause and Effect: Visualising Sustainability*, Stephan Bohle provides innovative examples of how organisations have effectively made sustainability messages visual and memorable. Bohle says: "Sustainability communication must succeed in touching us emotionally by establishing a relationship to our everyday life."



### 10. Tell stories

People love stories and they have been an effective means for communication for centuries. People engage with and retain information far more easily if it is presented as a story. In this article I have provided practical examples. People remember principles more easily if they can 'picture' examples.

### Conclusion

Human behaviour is complex, irrational and often unpredictable. This should make us ask if the way we think we are communicating is actually effective. These ten steps might not bring total success but will certainly help avoid errors which blunt our effectiveness. In any engagement plans use these ten points to evaluate your approach before you try it. Good luck!

John Mulholland is on 07791 698839, [j.a.mulholland@btinternet.com](mailto:j.a.mulholland@btinternet.com)