4 ways to make behavioral change stick
Why simulations produce the best results

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Currently, more than 1,700 businesses in the U.S. and over 7,800 businesses globally use simulations as part of their training.[1,2] In the business world, the overwhelming consensus is that simulations are valid representations of real-world issues facing managers.[3] Clearly leading CHROs and CLOs know that simulations work, but why? There are four main reasons.

1. Simulations accelerate learning

Research on simulations highlights their utility as a learning aid for organizations because they allow managers to learn by doing in a safe environment.[4]

When used as part of a training and development program, simulations add variety and complement other more traditional methods of learning such as case studies and lectures.[5]

Simulations tend to be stimulating and enjoyable, thus further enhancing learning, and can improve teamwork, particularly for intact teams within the same organization.

2. The behavioral change sticks back in real life

The experiential learning environment within a simulation facilitates the transfer of learning back into real life.[6] After simulation gameplay, a phase of observation and reflection occurs where participants discuss their experiences and share their different perspectives.

Then, participants compare and connect their experiences to prevailing theories in their real-life workplaces. During this reflection phase, participants can evaluate the significance of their simulated experiences, creating generalizations and defining strategies for effective and ineffective behavior.

These strategies can then be tested in the simulation and lead once again to new experiences, which support the development of better strategies to apply in real life.[7]

3. They promote social learning and collaboration

There is evidence that simulations offer a form of collaborative learning through teamwork.[6] Since simulations are mistake-friendly learning environments, where there is no real consequence to failure, they facilitate team learning through trial and error and immediate feedback.

Well-constructed simulations allow multiple contexts and scenarios, facilitating team learning across "knowledge domains," i.e. business functions or technical specialties.

4. Simulations are catalysts for organizational change

Simulations have proven to be useful tools in planned organizational change efforts, especially during diagnosis and data gathering phases. They aid in developing an understanding of existing organizational structures and work processes.[8]

For example, members of an organization can work with designers to create simulations that represent the processes and structures of the real organization. While going through the simulation, participants can explore and discuss the existing advantages and disadvantages of these structures.

This shared experience fosters real debate and discourse on ideas for potential change strategies, and these ideas can be applied back in the real world.[8]

Business simulations can also help people in organizations reconstruct their reality.[6] Simulations can be designed to imitate organizational processes and change them in an experiential and playful way.

Going through a simulation can spark creative problem solving in real-life, since the simulated environment allows participants to experience several different scenarios.

Participants can also experience playing different roles and various social situations, therefore gaining an understanding of different perceptions and characteristics of the organization. In subsequent discussions, these alternative behaviors and perceptions can be shared amongst the participants, generating ideas for implementing real world change.

Simulations help organizations understand their real-life organizational processes and create space for organizations to experiment with potential reconfigurations that are a result of their change efforts. These are useful insights, especially during the early diagnostic phases of change.

So, why do leading organizations turn to simulations? They are powerful aids to learning both at an individual and an organizational level. Learning as a result of simulations is more likely to translate to behavioral change back in the workplace, while at the same time accelerating collaboration. Simulations also allow participants to envision different realities and outcomes. All of this translates to simulations being the most powerful catalyst for individual and organizational change efforts.

Sources

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