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Beyond nudge: it's time to call forth people's internal willingness to change

Nudging is all very well, but to create real behavioural change we need to transform attitudes

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The congestion charge may nudge us to leave our cars at home – but does it actually change our attitudes? Photograph: Graeme Robertson

Environmental, social and economic crises are converging, but the government is only nudging us towards [sustainable living](#). Nudging has become popular since the publication [Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness in 2008](#). It offers an alternative to regulation, which appeals to the current government's ideology, by influencing people's decision-making processes through external interventions.

The aim is to create an environment that nudges people to make better choices, without forcing certain outcomes upon anyone. There are various tools for achieving this, which are largely aligned with the [MindSpace](#) tools now being applied by the Behavioural Insights Team at the Cabinet Office.

This is all good stuff. Kerb-side collection nudges us to recycle more. The congestion charge nudges us to drive less in central London. An automated premium on bottles of beverages nudges us to return the bottles for recycling to get our deposit back. Putting recycling bins by every office desk and the landfill bin in a central space nudges us to take the path of least resistance by using the former.

Some nudges are more successful than others, but every success in sustainable living is welcome. So hooray for nudging — especially if it spares us a nanny state with copious regulations we want to defy because none of us like being bossed about, even if our future is at stake.

And yet, in the face of all this nudging and all the information at our disposal, why aren't we (individuals, organisations, governments) taking the necessary action to ensure a naturally, socially and economically



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stable environment in which we can thrive? The House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee's [recent report into behaviour change](#) also supports nudging, but asks the same question by concluding that the government needs to do more than just nudge us in the right direction.

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What more can be done?

Philosopher and scientist Ervin Laszlo suggests that "only by redesigning our thinking and acting, not the world around us," can we solve our problems. Whether through regulation, processes, incentives, policies or structures, mainstream approaches to [behaviour change](#) are focusing on external influences with limited effects. Recycling paper at work because the recycling bin is closest doesn't necessarily transfer to recycling paper at home. People need to be engaged in a way that creates a change of heart so that their choices come from their deepest values and become integral to their lives. What is missing is that we are not yet calling forth people's internal willingness to change. We are not yet uprooting the deeply entrenched personal and corporate attitudes that impede our ability to act with speed, purpose and rigour.

Behaviour at work is often prescribed, incentivised and systemised. For example: service staff have to follow scripts when talking to customers; bonuses are awarded for hitting sales targets; company values are pinned to office walls to encourage people to live them; competencies are defined, then performance managed. These interventions go so far, but rarely far enough in creating lasting change. Reading scripts leads to boredom, resentment and cold conversations that alienate customers. Bonuses motivate, but also generate self-interest that neglects real customer needs. Millions are spent marketing grand service promises, which are then diluted or broken by the negative attitudes of low-paid, low-morale front-line employees who aren't interested in company values.

A change of attitude

The notion that external forces determine human behaviour is one of the great myths driving our society. Sure, we are all influenced by what goes on around us. But the real cause of behaviour is attitude. We cannot control what happens to us, but we can control what we think about what happens. This is not news. Viktor Frankl, psychologist and Holocaust survivor, said, "Everything can be taken from man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms — to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." Einstein, Churchill, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Gandhi and other great leaders, scientists and psychologists have all shared this understanding. The tragedy is that how to alter attitudes has been reserved by a few instead of taught to the masses as a fundamental part of education.

K Bradford Brown was a clinical psychologist whose mission was to teach ordinary people to change their behaviour and improve their quality of life by transforming their attitudes. Over 40 years he developed a powerful set of skills that could be used by anyone in any situation. Last year, we ran a workshop to test AQ (attitudinal intelligence) with a group of individuals who wanted to change and maintain their behaviour for more sustainable living. We focused on changing limiting attitudes (such as "it's inconvenient", "it's too time consuming", "the problem is too big" and "why should I when others don't?") into attitudes aligned with people's higher purposes (such as wanting to "use only my fair share of resources", "preserve the natural habitats of this planet" and "create a more equitable world"). The results were significant, with participants maintaining new behaviours, such as walking or cycling instead of driving, and buying local produce, over 70% of the time compared with a control group who managed it 43% of the time. Workshop participants also made significant changes in behaviours they had not even targeted.

Invest in education

The absence of the ability to change attitudes in the fabric of society leaves us nudging our way towards sustainable behaviours and increases the need for fiscal incentives, prohibitive legislation and social marketing. Improving people's attitudinal intelligence requires educational interventions, but these can be made in many organisational contexts, including schools and universities. Every business with a triple bottom line and stewardship agenda could invest in creating a major attitudinal shift. It would make a big difference. Moreover, the ability to

teach these skills can be transferred to those who work for these organisations, enabling them to sustain results without needing experts and consultants such as us.

There can be no sustainable living without enabling people to make these changes for themselves and for future generations. There are few behavioural problems in society that cannot be traced to limiting attitudes. Transforming these attitudes calls for vision, boldness, compassion and an educational revolution that makes attitudinal intelligence as accessible, practical and mainstream as maths, English and technology. While it is widely accepted that the world around us needs to change to ensure our sustainability as a species, it is we who need to change it. From the inside out. And for good.

Vania Phtidis and Sophie Sabbage work at [Interaction UK](#), a consultancy specialising in culture and behaviour change in organisations. Sophie built Interaction to support an inheritable world by transforming the quality of corporate life through Attitudinal Intelligence. Vania has recently completed the Msc in Education for Sustainability and is dedicated to addressing the attitudinal blocks to living sustainably.

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