

Sustainable behavior

Discover how motivation, morals and reinforcement relate to behavior—and how NGOs and business leaders can avoid pitfalls and promote success

(Introductory edition)



Vermillion

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Introduction

In early 2008, Vermillion was handed a business and communication plan that had been commissioned a decade before by a large eco-minded utility company. Its plans relied on an extensive survey of Canadians. And it said, among other things, that a majority of adults understood the risks of unmanaged environmental impacts, and that consumers and voters were ready to adjust lifestyles.

Since then, Vermillion has seen numerous reports from experienced survey firms saying similar things, and yet it is clear from people's behavior, that when they vote as consumers and as citizens, many other factors drive their final decisions.

It's clear that there is a disconnect between knowing what to do, *doing it*, and sustaining the behavior over time.

Vermillion has observed the responses of many NGOs to this reality: some groups condemn people for their weakness; some try to guilt them for not responding to the needs of their grandchildren; some assume people just need more information about how bad things could get; and some try to generate tools to help people make better choices.

Rather than automatically adopting one of those approaches, Vermillion began asking what professional psychologists know about the drivers of human behavior. We wanted to learn which of the common advocacy tactics had the best hope of working—and what else might work.

In the course of our journey, we discovered leading moral reasoning and motivation theories, and their relationships with behavior.

This introductory report is Vermillion's distillation of four years of study and observation relating to these questions.

Sustaining motivation

At a primitive level, the drive to care trumps the desire to be fair, and the impulse to care lasts longer.

So when making the case for responsible consuming or investing, it is good strategy to emphasize why people should care about the impacts on their own families and others rather than why an action is unfair to future generations.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Humans are driven by instinctual, emotional, and intellectual motivations. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs tells us that our most basic urge is to satisfy our need for resources and safety (first for ourselves and our families, then for our communities, but not necessarily for the world).

This is crucial: the drive to satisfy economic needs happens at a more primitive level than the wish to see oneself as 'good'.

But this is not the whole story.

Lawrence Kohlberg's Levels of Moral Development

After a series of needs are satisfied, that's when we want other things, like feeling we're good and moral people.

Kohlberg identified six predictable moral reasoning levels that people go through as they develop. This includes a 'Level 3' that believes in an absolute right and wrong (no shades of gray) and further levels that rely on concepts of justice and fairness to resolve things when values collide.

Kohlberg found that most adults settle in at Level 4. These people value doing the right thing *most of the time* in order to sustain the economy and a functioning society. Without ever saying it, these people see law and order and fairness as the *3 pillars* of sustainability. And to them 'law and order' means sustaining existing power/authority structures, even when they are imperfect. **This likely includes free market capitalism, even though that will mean something different in each country.**

Carol Gilligan's model: The Ethics of Caring

Gilligan's approach emphasizes the role of caring in decision-making. She noted the instinctual drive to look out for the vulnerable among us, but the drive to secure resources for one's family and community (for 'people' and 'prosperity') is also part of that caring.

Application

National laws and international agreements tend to be framed in the language of common law and case law, which were built on concepts of fairness and justice. So it should be no surprise that many NGO appeals to governments deal with the unfairness in unmanaged externalities. But it turns out that moral people who center their behaviors on fairness are easily diverted as soon as they think the other parties are not doing their part.

Consider: how long would any of us keep paying phone bills if an errant telephone company stopped providing the service?

Then consider all the efforts at international treaties to let the developing world use a different set of carbon constraints than rich countries; these deals are easily derailed with voter campaigns that point out how some countries would not be carrying their 'fair share' of the sacrifice.

In contrast, almost everyone can care for children for decades, even though it is not fair. And the children rarely appreciate the sacrifice until much later. People have an innate capacity to endure in the face of unfairness when they believe they should care for a vulnerable constituency.

Sustaining behavior

Good behavior is interruptible.

In the context of business sustainability, a good strategy is to give clear direction about what success looks like, and then positively reinforce real and measureable improvements through market and regulatory signals.

Mastery Motivation

People want to be masters of what they do. (Psychologists call it *mastery motivation*.) And they want to seek pleasure and avoid pain, so they value tools that help them have the pleasure of mastery, instead of the pain that comes with inadequacy. It's why people will pay more for better tennis racquets and better productivity software.

When people see themselves succeed, they are pleased and more likely to commit and continue.

Generally, when people see they have failed – and especially when they are condemned for failing – they'll try to improve. But if they find that a task cannot be mastered, they'll look for other things to be good at.

Conclusion: Mastery motivation is the glue that connects moral reasoning and behavior; so sustained behavior is not just a matter of discipline and good character.

Application

This means that improved behavior of any kind is interruptible. But especially when good behavior is undermined and discontinued, onlookers will likely think the person isn't committed, and then judge or shame them instead of helping them, which is unlikely to produce better results in the long run.

This creates a real dilemma for watchdog sustainability NGOs, who must talk about the risks to society from poor workplace safety, from assaults on ecosystem services and from poor governance. If they put companies that try in the same basket with those that don't, they impede further improvements, but if they celebrate the better companies, they risk being accused of selling out.

In the context of business sustainability, a better strategy is to give clear direction about what success looks like, and positively reinforce real and measureable improvements through market and regulatory signals.

There's more to discover

Vermillion looks forward to working with a series of stakeholder groups to develop more effective and emotionally salient messages to help achieve the future we want.

A final word on Kohlberg

Even though the drive to care trumps the desire to be fair on so many levels, Kohlberg's theory still has wide application.

Kohlberg and later researchers found that no amount of coaxing will cause a person to move up a level in their reasoning. People can understand an argument from the next level up – and they can see how someone might feel that way – they just aren't convinced.

Change occurs *only* when someone sees their existing paradigm yields unsatisfactory results. And people never skip a level; they only climb one at a time.

So preaching at them to embrace ideas that their values cannot grasp only causes them to tune out or to dig in deeper.

This provokes some important questions:

- *What if the widespread use of ineffective messages slows progress just as much as harmful subsidies?*
- *If so, what messages will optimally trigger and sustain human behavior to bring about the future we want?*

Application

Remember, Kohlberg found that most adults see law and order and fairness as keys to sustaining society. And to them 'law and order' means sustaining existing power and authority structures. Even imperfect ones.

Knowing that, it's probably smart advocacy to construct messages that fit with most adult's wish to sustain society (as opposed to trees). It makes sense to show them all the ways that full-spectrum sustainability strengthens communities. Also, make sure the public sees those messages coming from authoritative business and social institutions—as opposed to coming from university students marching with signs.

There is much more to discover about the paths to undermining or reinforcing behavior

With these and other theories in mind, what can practitioners do differently to build better business cases? What can business leaders say and do to deepen employee engagement? And what can NGOs and government agencies do?

Vermillion will discuss more of these theories and questions at conferences in 2012, and in the (upcoming) larger version of this report.

We look forward to working with some of you to co-create effective answers.

Vermillion is a non-partisan policy institute dedicated to advancing full-spectrum sustainability through research, multi-stakeholder engagement and modern communication design.

We advance the vision that sustainability means caring for people, planet *and* prosperity by delivering accurate, high-impact messages to key audiences. Our movement is fueled by people like you who are committed to accelerating innovation in sustainability.

Please join us.

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