

The Sacred and the Secular in OBM

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The purpose of this article is to comment briefly on some observations and trends we have noted within the OBM movement as a way to offer a preview of a paper we will present at the upcoming ABA conference in May. Various aspects of the project we will present are at least loosely related to the observations and trends we identify herein.

From our perspective, one clear trend is that OBM appears to be undergoing a period of “secularism” wherein some of its more “sacred” interventions are being questioned. Numbered among these “sacred” traditions are the regular use by OBM practitioners of feedback (Alvero, Bucklin, & Austin, 2001; Balcazar, Hopkins, & Suarez, 1986; Kluger & DiNisi, 1996), goal setting (Fellner & Sulzer-Azaroff, 1984), and social reinforcement (O’Hara, Johnson, & Beehr, 1985). Of these, feedback arguably is the most foundational in that it typically has served as the first treatment upon which other OBM interventions are superimposed (following a components-analysis-like method).

For purposes of this discussion, we will define “feedback” as presentation of information by some means to employees about some aspect of their past or present work output. As has been argued elsewhere, feedback so defined is a highly complex undertaking likely composed of numerous functional elements (cf., Balcazar et al., 1986) with many possible delivery options (Duncan & Bruwelheide, 1986; Johnson, Mawhinney, & Redmon, 2001, p. 13). In light of previous detailed treatments of this matter, it seems there is little need for us to belabor these complexities here. Suffice it to say that embedded within many feedback procedures are discriminative-stimulus-like antecedents, rule-based-like consequences, and goal-setting-like components that can be delivered to individuals or groups via visual, auditory, or written means.

To us, one of the more puzzling aspects of feedback is the large variation in its effectiveness, ranging from instances where there are significant and long-lasting effects to those where the effects are either modest and short-term or nonexistent (cf., Alvero et al., 2001). A major question raised by such variability is whether or not feedback, per se, is effective at all. Perhaps those instances of apparent success really can be attributed to some hitherto undiscovered factor that happens to be present in those specific situations and not others. In this case, feedback surely should be stripped of its “sacred” status as a “tried and true” OBM intervention. The alternative view is that procedural variations in feedback delivery can account for the reported differential effects. This amounts to saying that feedback is indeed effective, but some ways of delivering it are better than others. As a beginning effort to disentangle these possibilities, it would seem reasonable to analyze the many different procedural variations in feedback delivery reported in the literature to determine if any consistent relation exists between particular feedback configurations and the outcomes they produce.

What we are suggesting here is that the “optimal conditions” for feedback effectiveness are perhaps yet to be fully determined (Johnson et al., 2001). Given the foundational importance of feedback in organizational applications, we would urge members of the OBM research community to continue or even escalate research devoted to systematic variations of feedback in search of an answer to this differential-effectiveness puzzle. While this undertaking might be laboratory based at first, it should be extended quickly to appropriate field settings so as to maximize the chances of organizationally meaningful results. Hopefully this work will reveal whether or not reports of the demise of feedback have been exaggerated.

We may be especially sensitive to this feedback “puzzle” because of our own consistent successes in obtaining robust effects of this intervention, despite reports from others of little or no effects. In our own work, it is only when we fail to use procedures that have worked for us in the past that we find modest or erratic feedback effects (e.g., an unpublished manufacturing study involving ‘teams’). Feedback has been consistently effective for us when it has been given to individuals rather than groups, posted rather than shown in other ways, about behaviors rather than more remote outcomes, provided on a frequent rather than occasional basis, using graphical formats, and delivered without threat. In the project we will present at ABA, pronounced improvement occurred at the onset of the feedback intervention even though the information being presented related to a complex behavioral measure. Moreover, we found that the effects of feedback cascaded from behavior to results producing definitive changes in measures of accomplishment, ultimately resulting in attainment of the overall organizational outcome targeted in advance of the project. We will discuss these findings in our conference paper in light of current feedback controversies.

As noted above, feedback is not the only “sacred” OBM tradition in question. Surprisingly, however, one intervention that apparently has escaped much secular attention, for whatever reason, is behavioral task clarification (BTC). By BTC we mean the use of “pre-feedback:” that is, task-relevant information given to participants in an OBM application at or near the outset of the project (cf., Mirman, 1982). Examples of BTC in our own work can be found in the reports of Crowell, Anderson, Abel, and Sergio (1988) and Anderson, Crowell, Hantula, and Siroky (1988).

As interventions go, BTC seems easier to classify than feedback for it appears to fit squarely into the “antecedent” category. However, like feedback, the effects of this “treatment” have been almost equally as variable, albeit less pronounced when it works. Perhaps BTC has escaped its own secular suspicion because often it is incorporated as part of a feedback procedure. Nonetheless, from the literature, there is good reason to suppose BTC might have performance enhancing effects independent of feedback. So, here again, the variable results reported for this intervention may give rise to the suspicion that it, too, should be stripped of any “sacred” status as a sure-fire OBM treatment. But, as with feedback, there is the lingering possibility that variations in BTC effectiveness are traceable to fluctuations in the means and content of its delivery. Certainly, this possibility is given credence by the observation that there are enormous differences in what has passed for BTC in the literature. BTC delivery has ranged from single- to multiple-session meetings, with single individuals or groups, using written or spoken information, of a general or specific nature. Once again, we are reluctant to

accede to the demise of this intervention until the impact of these procedural variations has been examined more fully.

Based on certain aspects of the Crowell et al. (1988) study, we are inclined to the view that BTC as delivered in that project was an effective stand-alone treatment with consequences separable from feedback and praise. The most telling finding in this regard was the observation that when feedback and social reinforcement were withdrawn in that study, performance levels did not return to baseline levels, but instead remained at levels comparable to those associated with the original BTC intervention. This suggested that BTC, once delivered, was irreversible. Logically this makes sense since one cannot really take away “task clarification” once subjects have been exposed to it. In the study to be discussed at ABA, we will revisit the question of BTC effects and its relation to feedback.

For some time now, we have been inspired by Mirman’s (1982) suggestion that successive interventions in an OBM project should be considered as separate “systems.” This suggestion doubtlessly was derived from the fact that typical interventions, like BTC and feedback, involve a relatively complex set of procedures. In our own work, we have extended this concept of systems to include the following “sacred” elements of an OBM arsenal: “Targeting” designed to identify the focus of what is to be changed (usually one or more behaviors); “Tracking” intended to measure or assess the targets and any related outcomes that might herald organizational improvement; BTC and feedback (discussed above), along with goal setting, coaching, and social reinforcement. Perhaps “contingency contracting” might be viewed as an eighth system to be used in situations where employees have shown prolonged resistance to change.

Technically, our “systems” arsenal consists of two kinds of agents. Targeting and tracking are really “enabling systems,” as opposed to “systems of change”, because they are necessary prerequisites for the other agents to be effective. The remaining systems (BTC, feedback, etc.) actually stimulate the change itself.

Even a casual survey of the OBM literature reveals it is rare to find OBM projects that include all systems of change in one study. Most common are projects that include just feedback and reinforcement interventions (cf., Nolan, Jarema, & Austin, 1999). Goal setting also is used, but far less frequently. In our ABA conference paper, we will report on the use of a hybrid intervention combining goal setting with social reinforcement. We resorted to this hybrid because, once the feedback treatment had been installed, the introduction of subsequent interventions was met with some organizational resistance. We will discuss this problem, which has occurred more than once in our experience, and the need to which it gives rise for flexibility in intervention planning.

While social reinforcement has received at least as much empirical and theoretical scrutiny as feedback in the literature, the practical difficulties we have encountered involving organizational resistance to the use of praise often are not discussed. Bloom (2003) and others hint at such difficulties, but we do not find much substantive attention devoted to this important matter. As we have argued elsewhere (Crowell et. al, 1988), social reinforcement may be one of those interventions that is absolutely critical to the fullest and most enduring organizational change. In light of our experience with this problem, we have compiled some of the most frequent objections we have encountered.

Several of these objections arose in the project we will describe at ABA. We will review these objections and discuss their relation to such issues as ‘top-down’ support, promises by management, project successes, organization impatience, and the like.

Most OBM researchers are aware of the various validity threats inherent in field research. We have discussed them ourselves at great length elsewhere (Crowell & Anderson, 1982a, 1982b). But, what often has not been the focus of much attention or discussion are the inevitable so-called “unplanned” interventions that occur in the course of doing field work. By “unplanned” we mean situations where, despite the researcher’s plans and desires, members of the host organization, for whatever reason, make decisions and take actions during the tenure of a project that could influence the outcome of the study. These actions can range from a major change in management personnel to alterations to equipment that compose a vital part of a manufacturing application. We have found that issues related to how such “unplanned” events should be handled, both from a design and measurement perspective, rarely are taken up in the literature. The study we will present in May involved one major “unplanned” event. We will describe how we accommodated it and try to abstract some guidelines for dealing with such anomalies.

In conclusion, we are grateful for the use of this forum as a way to promote interest in our upcoming paper. Moreover, we remain confident that OBM is a vital and important field worthy of its ongoing research and archival endeavors.

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