

# TRANSFER AND APPLICATION



In a series looking at the issues surrounding the transfer and application of learning, **Robert Terry** highlights the difficulty of changing people's behaviour

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**The answer to a problem can't be found at the bottom of a glass. But that doesn't stop a great many people looking and, if we are to believe the government's pronouncements on 'binge' drinking, violence and the drain (no pun intended) on the NHS by alcohol-related illness, the 'demon drink' is once again a major threat to society.**

As a fan of the occasional glass of something red and full-bodied, it's therefore a great pleasure to point to a problem to which the answer may indeed lie, if not at the bottom of a glass then close by.

When Alcoholics Anonymous was formed in 1939, a founding principle was the right to anonymity. Which is why the debt of gratitude owed to its founders by so many recovering drunks can be directed at two fellow sufferers known only as Bill W and Dr Bob.

The famous *Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous*, penned by Bill W in 1939, acknowledges a great truth: that an alcoholic who no longer drinks has an exceptional faculty for helping others who want to change their lives.

Harmful behaviours such as alcoholism and eating disorders represent, on the face of it, a challenge much greater than a manager's misuse of time, reluctance to delegate or even an inability to control his anger. Which may be why we fall into the trap of using inappropriate methods to provide a solution. Our reliance on educational models to help managers become more efficient and effective stems from the belief that, if only they knew more, they would be better. In reality, the fact that some managers behave inappropriately or ineffectively is not in the main through ignorance; no more than an alcoholic remains an alcoholic because he doesn't know that drink is harming him and ruining the lives of those around him.

Knowledge, or more accurately self-knowledge, is an important component in the development of managers, in the same way that alcoholics are encouraged in the *Twelve Steps* to admit that they "were powerless over alcohol". But acknowledgement or recognition is the journey's beginning, not its end.

In the excellent *Changing for Good*, James Prochaska and his colleagues describe a "scientific revolution" emanating from 12 years' research into the trials and tribulations of thousands of people seeking cures for harmful behaviours such as smoking and eating disorders. They mapped their subjects' progress and formed some conclusions that should give pause for thought to anyone involved in management and leadership development.

They discovered that most of us are incapable of 'self-change': only 5 per cent of their sample proved able to 'break their habit' with no false starts, no failures and no relapses. It would appear that, for the overwhelming majority of us, failure is normal when we're trying to change our behaviour.

The consequences of this insight into the frailty of the human condition are as enormous for practitioners in workplace performance improvement as they are for psychotherapists. The authors of *Changing for Good* developed a "stage-based" approach to behavioural change in which subjects migrate through six psychological states.

They also identified nine "processes of change" and any number of techniques that could be deployed with the proviso that, like most things in life, timing is everything. The 'right' technique used during the wrong stage produced no benefits and often triggered a relapse. Vitality, each stage required the active involvement of "helping relationships" – people who are there at those critical moments of failure, relapse and self-doubt, to offer the encouragement, advice and reassurance that will enable the "changer" to move forward once more.

Changing any behaviour is difficult and protracted. Whether you are moved by the scientific methods of Prochaska or by the 'fellowship' of Bill W and Dr Bob, the lesson of their success is that "helping relationships" means more than a trainer in a classroom. It means line managers, peers, coaches, colleagues, partners and friends. And it means the inevitability of relapse. We would be wise to truly understand the power of habits and never underestimate the time and effort involved in conquering them. ■