

Levers of Behavior Change

ABOUT THE FRAMEWORK

There are many possible ways of characterizing the motivations and barriers to behavior change. Rare's Center for Behavior & the Environment has developed a simple framework for behavior change insights comprising six behavioral levers.

A lever is typically something that you pull to cause a change in something else. Each behavioral lever represents a category of evidence-based strategies from behavioral and social science. The levers are discrete and can be pulled in different combinations for different effects depending on the context.

For decades, the traditional environmental toolkit has consisted of three common levers to change behavior: information, rules and regulations, and material incentives. Behavioral science research tells us that there are three other important levers to add to our toolkit: emotional appeals, social influences, and choice architecture. This quick guide provides an overview of the levers as well as principles and strategies for applying them.

Learn more at behavior.rare.org/levers.



INFORMATION

Providing information about what the desired behavior is, why it matters, and how to do it

Provide step-by-step instructions and build self-efficacy

- Offer training on the target behavior
- Provide materials that give instructions on how to do the target behavior
- Build confidence in being able to do the target behavior

Build awareness and understanding

- Provide informational forums, meetings, or materials that describe the target behavior and its importance
- Communicate about the target behavior in a clear, concrete, and unambiguous way
- Give feedback on performing the target behavior



RULES & REGULATIONS

Enacting rules that promote restrict a behavior

Mandate or prohibit behavior

- Enact mandates that require or encourage the target behavior
- Enact prohibitions that limit or forbid the target behavior



MATERIAL INCENTIVES

Increasing or decreasing real or perceived costs, time, or effort for doing a behavior

Make it easy or the alternative hard

- Make the target behavior more convenient and accessible to do (e.g., remove barriers, provide substitutes)
- Make the current problem behavior more difficult to do (e.g., create friction points, barriers)

Give rewards or penalties

- Incentivize or reinforce the target behavior
- Penalize or fine for cases of the problem behavior



EMOTIONAL APPEALS

Using emotional messages to drive behavior

Leverage emotions in specific contexts

- **Pride:** Use to motivate people to show others what they have done when they have achieved a goal or done the right thing
- **Hope:** Use to motivate people to start a behavior when they can achieve a desired outcome while facing a threat
- **Fear:** Use to motivate people to avoid risks when they experience uncertainty or an immediate threat to their wellbeing
- **Anger:** Use to motivate people to confront others when they witness injustice or experience threats to personal autonomy
- **Interest:** Use to motivate people to seek information when something is novel and complex
- **Prospect of shame:** Use to motivate people to avoid an action when others might find out about socially undesirable actions

Personalize the message

- Put a human face on campaigns and focus on a single story over abstract statistics
- Tailor messages to make them personally relevant, relatable, and appealing



SOCIAL INFLUENCES

Leveraging the behavior, beliefs, and expectations of others

Make the target behavior observable

- Publicly broadcast who has and has not engaged in the target behavior
- Provide a way for people to show they are doing the target behavior
- Encourage public commitments or pledges to drive the target behavior

Highlight others who are doing the target behavior

- Share that people are currently doing the target behavior
- Promote cases of success with the target behavior
- Leverage credible and trusted messengers doing the target behavior
- Facilitate peer or community exchanges where others can observe and gain support for the target behavior

Share social expectations about the target behavior

- Provide visible indicators that signal support for the target behavior (e.g., hats, badges)
- Communicate that people think others should be doing the target behavior
- Highlight the possibility of social sanctions for doing the problem behavior
- Create situations in which people feel like they should reciprocate
- Create conversation around shared beliefs and expectations



CHOICE ARCHITECTURE

Changing the context in which choices are made

Direct attention

- Make the target behavior the default option
- Prompt a decision between options
- Draw attention to the target behavior by making it salient
- Emphasize long-term benefits of behaviors over immediate ones
- Emphasize variables that frame your target behavior as the correct choice

Simplify messages and decisions

- Streamline complex decisions to focus on key information or actions
- Provide shortcuts for a behavior with many steps or options

Use timely moments and prompts

- Target moments of transition and habit formation
- Provide prompts and reminders about the target behavior

Facilitate planning and goal setting

- Provide support in making a plan to achieve the target behavior
- Leverage personal commitments in the present to limit future decisions

LEVER COMBINATIONS

Designing successful behavior change interventions often requires a combination of levers to address people's motivations and barriers. You can find a few examples listed here, and there is a complete set of combinations in our full guide to the levers.



Social Influences + Material Incentives

Group incentives can be an effective way to motivate behavior, where a person's success is tied to others also succeeding. For example, if a person only receives an incentive if another person or their whole group reaches a shared goal, then they are more likely to work together. Reciprocity can also pair well with incentives; free samples or products can encourage people to participate in related programs.

Emotional Appeals + Information

Designing informational messaging that incorporates an emotional appeal can be an effective way to motivate behavior change. Combining details about what something is, why someone should care, or how to do something with familiar and personal references, context, and metaphors can help your message resonate.

Choice Architecture + Material Incentives

In some cases, making a behavior easier involves significantly reducing the effort, time, or resources required in addition to changing smaller hassle factors and attention. You can also harness loss aversion by taking away or discontinuing payments with non-compliance. Offering incentives at a timely moment close to doing the behavior can further boost adoption.