

## Guest Post – Changing Behaviors

Jan 30th, 2012

by [eweber](#).

[1 comment](#)

[17tweetsretweet](#)

*The essential role of the brain is to serve as a buffer against environmental variation.*

– John Allman, *Evolving Brains*

**By [Dr. Donalee Markus](#)** — The sentence quoted above is perhaps the most succinct explanation ever presented for why it is so difficult to change someone's behavior.



Dr. Donalee Markus

The image of the brain as a buffer or filter is far different than the usual description of the brain as a computer. This difference is important because if we conceptualize the brain as a computer, then changing someone's behavior is simply a matter of inserting the right program and letting it run. However, if the model for the brain is that of a filter that serves to resist environmental change, then we have an explanation for why telling people they have to act differently and even the sincere desire to behave differently is not enough. Personal experience confirms this. Habits are difficult to break, even habits we know are self-destructive. Even promises to change that solicit an honest attempt invariably backslide into the unwanted behavior.

Of course, sometimes people do change. Old habits can be broken, new habits can be established. The willingness to change begins with the recognition that things are not working out the way we expect them to. Before we can recognize that something is wrong, we have to have a mental image of how it is supposed to be. Before someone can recognize that his/her behavior needs to change, he/she has to have a goal in mind. The more clearly that goal can be imagined, the easier it is to recognize what has to be done to achieve it. Self-help gurus make their fortunes teaching people how to visualize themselves out of destructive behaviors. The big advantage the gurus have over managers is that the people they deal with are already intrinsically motivated to change.

Intrinsic motivation has long been recognized as the key to success in any endeavor. It is

why people persevere for long hours and through discouraging setbacks. A great deal has been written about the subject by educators. However, the simplest definition of intrinsic motivation may be the expectation that one will eventually succeed through one's efforts. So, in order to be intrinsically motivated, we need to feel we have the ability to solve the problem that confronts us. If we look closely, we can see the brain working as a filter here. We are motivated to solve the problems we feel capable of solving and ignore the problems we do not know how to solve. Therefore, if we want to solve different problems (in other words, change our behavior), we have to change the filter that is our brain.

The filters of the brain that influence our cognitive or problem-solving behaviors are called "mental models." Mental models are the consequence of the neural networks our genetics and experience have constructed in the neo-cortex of our brains. Mental models determine our expectations, and therefore, our decision-making/problem-solving behavior. Mental models are surprisingly easy to detect with the right tool. By having the people draw a complex figure that was specifically designed to test how they organize visual information, we get to see how they habitually see (i.e. understand) the world. When two people share the same mental model, it is easy for them to understand each other. When people have different mental models, they can be looking at the same information but organizing it differently. This means they would have different expectations and different goals.

When we try to correct someone's behavior, what we are really trying to do is to get him/her to see the world they way we do. In other words, we want him/her to share out mental model. Higher education does have a degree of influence on the development of a mental model. Parenting and life experiences create mental models. In this instance, individuals possess a particular mental model and they are intrinsically motivated to pursue a particular discipline because the job or the subject is based on their mental model. This is why experts often have difficulty discussing their work with people outside their specialty.

© Copyright 2012 Donalee Markus Ph.D. & Associates

*Donalee Markus (Ph.D) began cognitive restructuring in 1982. She designed 18,000 + context – free visual exercises that catalyze creativity and strengthen critical thinking skill.*

*Dr. Markus' book, Retrain Your Business Brain: Outsmart the Corporate Competition, is translated into over five languages.*

*In 2010 Dr. Markus designed Strong Mind Puzzles App to: Improve Concentration, Enhance memory, Sharpen problem-solving skills and Expand mental agility.*

*Her [iPhone application](#) is now available.*

Posted in: [General](#), [change](#), [change direction](#).

Tagged: [Donalee Markus](#) · [Dr. Donalee Markus](#)

484 Hillside Dr.  
Highland Park, IL 60035

[www.DesignsForStrongMinds.com](http://www.DesignsForStrongMinds.com)

[www.DSMexercises.com](http://www.DSMexercises.com)

<http://appshopper.com/games/strong-mind-puzzles>

Click on the above link to purchase the iPhone application with 1000's of games to enhance memory, concentration and problem solving !!!!!!!!!!!