

R5 STORYTELLING MODEL

An Evidence-Informed Framework for Behavior Change Communication

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The R5 Storytelling Model:

An Evidence-Informed Framework for Behavior Change Communication

Executive Summary

Organizations invest significant time and resources into communication, training, and strategic messaging. Yet despite these efforts, behavior often remains unchanged. Employees understand expectations but fail to act. Teams align during meetings but revert to old habits. Leaders communicate clearly, but desired outcomes are not achieved.

This gap between knowledge and action is well documented across disciplines and is often referred to as the knowledge-behavior gap or intention-action gap. Research consistently shows that awareness alone is insufficient to produce meaningful or sustained behavior change.

The R5 Storytelling Model offers a practical solution to this challenge. It is an evidence-informed framework that translates established behavior change theories into a structured, repeatable communication process. By aligning storytelling with principles from behavioral science, R5 enables leaders, educators, and facilitators to design messages that not only inform—but also influence and activate behavior.

The model consists of five steps: Recognize, Reflect, Repurpose, Refine, and Release. Each step corresponds to key mechanisms identified in behavior change research, including motivation, cognitive processing, social modeling, and behavioral activation.

R5 does not introduce a new theory of behavior change. Rather, it operationalizes existing research into a usable system for real-world application. When applied effectively, R5 supports improved communication, stronger alignment, and measurable changes in behavior and outcomes.

The Problem: Why Communication Fails to Change Behavior

Across sectors—including education, healthcare, government, and corporate environments—organizations rely heavily on communication to influence behavior. However, the assumption that communication leads directly to action is often flawed.

Research suggests that:

- Individuals can understand what to do without doing it
- Awareness does not guarantee motivation
- Motivation does not guarantee action

This disconnect is commonly described as the intention-action gap. Individuals may intend to change their behavior but fail to follow through due to competing priorities, unclear expectations, lack of confidence, or environmental barriers.

Traditional communication approaches often emphasize:

- Information delivery
- Logical arguments
- Data and evidence

While these elements are important, they are insufficient on their own. Behavior change requires more than understanding—it requires relevance, belief, clarity, and activation. This raises a critical question: How can communication be designed in a way that consistently leads to behavior change?

The Science of Behavior Change

A substantial body of research has explored how and why individuals change behavior. While these theories vary in focus, they converge on a key insight: behavior change is multi-dimensional and requires alignment across psychological, social, and environmental factors. The following models provide a foundation for understanding this process.

COM-B Model (Michie et al., 2011)

The COM-B model proposes that behavior occurs when three conditions are met:

- **Capability:** The individual has the knowledge and skills to perform the behavior
- **Opportunity:** The environment supports or enables the behavior
- **Motivation:** The individual wants or is willing to perform the behavior

If any of these components are missing, behavior change is unlikely to occur.

Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986)

This model explains how individuals process persuasive messages through two pathways:

- **Central route:** Deep, thoughtful processing leading to lasting attitude change
- **Peripheral route:** Surface-level processing leading to temporary change

For behavior change to be sustained, individuals must engage in central processing, which requires relevance, clarity, and cognitive engagement.

Narrative Transportation Theory (Green & Brock, 2000)

Narrative transportation occurs when individuals become emotionally and cognitively immersed in a story. When this happens:

- **Resistance** to persuasion decreases
- **Identification** with characters increases
- **Beliefs and attitudes** are more likely to shift

Stories are therefore a powerful mechanism for influencing behavior when structured effectively.

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986)

This theory emphasizes learning through observation and modeling. A key concept is self-efficacy, or the belief that one can successfully perform a behavior.

Individuals are more likely to act when:

- They **see** others modeling the behavior
- They **believe** the behavior is achievable
- They **understand** the steps involved

Kirkpatrick Model (Evaluation of Training)

The Kirkpatrick Model provides a framework for evaluating the effectiveness of training and communication across four levels:

1. **Reaction:** Did participants like it?
2. **Learning:** Did they understand it?
3. **Behavior:** Did they apply it?
4. **Results:** Did outcomes improve?

Many communication efforts fail to progress beyond Levels 1 and 2, leaving behavior and results unchanged.

The Gap Between Theory and Practice

While these models provide valuable insights, they do not offer a clear, practical process for designing communication that activates these mechanisms consistently.

In practice, organizations struggle with questions such as:

- How do we make messages feel relevant to different audiences?
- How do we translate experience into actionable insight?
- How do we ensure clarity without oversimplifying?
- How do we move from engagement to action?

This gap between theory and application limits the effectiveness of communication efforts. The R5 Storytelling Model was developed to address this gap.

The R5 Storytelling Model

The R5 Model is a structured process that aligns storytelling with evidence-based behavior change principles. It provides a repeatable method for designing communication that influences not only what people think—but what they do.

1. Recognize: Align communication with audience motivation and context. This step involves identifying the audience's needs, fears, and goals. It ensures that the message is grounded in what matters to the audience rather than what the speaker wants to say.

Behavior Function: Activates motivation (COM-B) and increases relevance (Elaboration Likelihood Model)

2. Reflect: Use lived experience to build credibility and trust. This step draws on real experiences to provide authenticity and model behavior. It allows the audience to observe how others have navigated similar situations.

Behavior Function: Builds trust and relatability (Narrative Transportation) and enhances self-efficacy through modeling (Social Cognitive Theory)

3. Repurpose: Translate experience into audience-centered meaning. In this step, the story is adapted to the audience's context. The focus shifts from the storyteller to the audience, highlighting lessons that are relevant and applicable.

Behavior Function: Strengthens motivation and connection (COM-B) and encourages deeper cognitive processing (Elaboration Likelihood Model)

4. Refine: Design delivery for clarity and understanding. This step ensures that the message is structured, clear, and engaging. It reduces cognitive overload and supports comprehension.

Behavior Function: Builds capability (COM-B) and supports central processing (Elaboration Likelihood Model)

5. Release: Deliver the message in a way that prompts action. The final step focuses on timing, delivery, and activation. It connects the message to a clear next step or behavior.

Behavior Function: Enables action (COM-B) and supports behavior application (Kirkpatrick Level 3)

Application of the R5 Model

The R5 Model can be applied across multiple contexts, including:

- Leadership communication
- Organizational change initiatives
- Public health campaigns
- Training and professional development
- Community engagement and advocacy

In each of these settings, the goal is not simply to inform—but to influence behavior in a measurable way.

Measurement and Evaluation

To assess the effectiveness of the R5 Model, organizations should evaluate outcomes beyond participant satisfaction.

Using the Kirkpatrick framework:

- **Level 1 (Reaction):** Did participants find the communication engaging?
- **Level 2 (Learning):** Did participants understand the message?
- **Level 3 (Behavior):** Did participants change their actions or communication patterns?
- **Level 4 (Results):** Did the change lead to improved outcomes?

R5 should be considered successful only when it produces measurable changes at the behavior and results levels.

Conclusion

Behavior change is not the result of information alone. It requires alignment between motivation, understanding, belief, and opportunity.

While existing theories provide insight into how behavior changes, they often lack practical guidance for implementation. The R5 Storytelling Model addresses this gap by offering a structured, evidence-informed process for designing communication that leads to action.

By integrating principles from behavioral science into a clear and repeatable framework, R5 enables organizations to move beyond awareness and toward meaningful, sustained change.

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