Changing Cultural Practices:
A Contextualist Framework for
Intervention Research by Anthony
Biglan
Context Press, 1995. 464 pages, $28.74

04/07/2015
Reviewed by Paul Harmon

This book is a very serious effort to apply behavioral psychology to culture change. The book begins with a technical discussion of the principles of reinforcement and then moves on to a discussion of how one changes cultural practices. It then considers several case studies in detail and ends by proposing a methodology for culture change. The book is scholarly, with quite a bit of discussion of experimental design, the analysis of data from experiments and a very detailed bibliography. For all that, a practical process practitioner can find much of value here.

Let's face it; most discussions of culture change are light weight exhortations to communicate better. Obviously it's important to communicate, to let employees know when change is coming, to explain the importance of the change and to encourage employees to help implement change. But what does one do after one has communicated and still faces a sullen or hostile audience? What does one do when the change one is trying to sell is perceived as undesirable by the people who are expected to implement the change?

There are lots of theories of motivation that work more or less effectively in different circumstances, but for most business process practitioners, the best available theory of motivation is based on simple behavioral principles. Employees tend to do things

that result in pleasant consequences and to avoid tasks that lead to punishing results. We all know this: We pay larger salaries to key employees and we give bonuses to salespeople that get the best results.

But we often don't provide reinforcement in a consistent manner. And we don't do it nearly as often as we should. Numerous studies show that managers are quick to notice mistakes and punish, but much less likely to notice when employees are behaving in the correct manner and to offer praise.

Changing culture, ultimately, means changing how groups of people behave. It involves defining desired behaviors and reinforcing them when they occur. It involves organizing those who can reinforce and assuring that they do it when they

should, which in turn means organizing reinforcement for those who do the reinforcement.   And, importantly, it means doing it systematically and consistently.

The studies cited in Changing Cultural Practices, from changing tobacco use and childrearing practices to reducing sexist and environmentally harmful practices, shows just how effective this approach can be.

Everyone who is serious about cultural change owes it to themselves to read and study this book. It lays out the principles of the most effective change approach we know about, and provides details about how to put it into practice.

Then you need to apply these principles by building them into your business process change methodology. It's one thing to redesign a business process and another to design a management plan to implement the new redesign. Smart change practitioners will master both.

Paul Harmon

Paul Harmon is the executive editor of www.bptrends.com, the author of *Business Process Change*, and a well-known speaker and consultant on business process improvement and organizational transformation efforts.