

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - ROB MOORE

(Katie Elliott & Rob Moore)

On today's show my guest is Rob Moore, the co-founder and Director of Behaviour Change, a not-for-profit social enterprise that helps people to do the 'right thing'. Over the last 12 years he's built up a wealth of experience in using behavioural insight to encourage positive social and environmental change.

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Rob Moore, it's a pleasure to talk with you today - hello!

Hello!

Can you tell us a little about what you do and why you're interested in the process of behaviour change?

I guess I've always been fascinated by people and why they do the things they do. Probably a lot of people are, I guess. You know, if you're one of those people that likes people-watching you will know that you're the kind of person who's just interested in the way that people tick and I guess I just took that a step further and made a bit of a career out of it. Essentially where that's taken me is trying to develop ways to encourage people to behave in a more positive way. And what we mean by that is more socially or environmentally responsible, so the things that I work on are typically challenging public behaviours that whoever we're working with is trying to do something about, and that could be anything from encouraging people to eat more healthily, to encouraging people to not drop litter or save energy or manage their money better so they don't get into debt and all of these behaviours are things that require a bit of a new way of thinking to do something about them. You know, they're not things that can be tackled by traditional marketing techniques. We need to find new ways and innovative ways to tackle them, so that's essentially what we do.

So does that mean that you understand things about how people can get themselves to do things that they want to do or need to do but don't necessarily find themselves doing? Because very often we'll say, "Yes, I know I should exercise or I should eat more fruit and veg or I should get more sleep, or I'd like to do this, that and the other", but the reality is we say that for year after year and nothing really changes. Do you know some things that can make it easier for people to go from saying what they should do to actually implementing some of those behaviours?

Yeah, I mean that's exactly it - that we constantly do things that we know aren't right or logical or sensible or helpful or healthy and occasionally catch ourselves and think, "Why on earth am I doing this?" And it's essentially just a factor of the way in which we're built. I mean, from a behavioural point of view, and I won't go too much into theory today, but there's a prominent theory about behaviour where we have two types of thinking. One of those is slow and effortful and conscious, so the kind of rational thinking brain that we're using now and that we use when we make complicated decisions but we use that rarely and that is quite evolutionarily recent. The brain that we use most of the time is fast and automatic and emotionally-led and subconscious and intuitive. We're designed like that because we are presented by choices constantly and if we stood and made slow decisions about everything, we'd never get anything done at all. You know, if you think of yourself in the supermarket, presented with thousands upon thousands of different products, if you made a rational choice about everything you bought in there, you'd be there three days later. We make very quick decisions just because we have to just to live and that's a part of our evolution, but because of that, things like eating more healthily for example, we all want to do that, but most of the time our fast, automatic brain is in control and so we're not making conscious decisions - "Right, this particular meal I'm going to buy this particular product". We're just going with the flow of life and the things that we normally do just take control because we're not consciously thinking about them.

Mm. And would it be fair to say that some people in the advertising world understand quite a lot about how to get us to do things in emotionally-driven, impulsive ways? Which is their job really, because if you're there to promote something, you really want people to be taking it up - but it can be difficult for us if we don't understand that that's what's going on, because we can be triggered into behaviours that perhaps we don't really want, but we don't understand what's going on underneath the surface.

Yeah, absolutely and a prime example of that is things like if you're booking a hotel or a flight or a holiday or something and you'll be on a site like that and there'll be constant little messages saying 'only six seats left' or 'five people looking at this right now' and all these kind of little messages that put you into a bit of a panic and make you hit that 'buy' button quicker than perhaps you would otherwise. And those are behavioural tactics, borne out of behavioural theory, that they're using to encourage you to do something and, you know, you're right - advertising in the kind of more historical sense absolutely uses emotions to get us to do something, but I guess, from our perspective, we can use those tactics for good purposes rather than just commercially-driven purposes like that. So the good thing about understanding more about why we behave in these irrational ways, but also how that irrationality exists in patterns, means that we can use that knowledge to help guide people in

the right direction. And, more often than not, to use the eating more healthily example again, it's things that people already want to do, but they're just not quite getting there. Litter is another good example: very few people actually want to throw litter on the ground and they know it's wrong, but they just end up doing it for whatever reason happens on that day. So with these things we can use what we know about behaviour and about the tactics for changing it, just to nudge people in the right direction towards where they already want to go.

So part of this is about helping people to design environments that support the behaviours that they want and discourage the behaviours that they don't want. Would that be fair to say?

Yeah, yeah, exactly. I mean it depends on what the behaviour is that we're trying to encourage. Sometimes it might be about reducing a barrier or reducing what we call 'friction', which is something that's working against what the behaviour is that we're trying to encourage. In other times it may be there isn't necessarily a challenge there, it's just that somebody hasn't thought about it. That may be just about making something more obvious, more salient.

So if we took a really practical example, let's say someone who finds themselves eating more snack food in the evenings when they're tired and they come home from work than they'd like and not going out and exercising, which is what they think they would like to be doing but it never seems to happen. So after a long day at work, getting home, thinking "I can't be bothered to go and do a run or go to the gym" or whatever it might be and then flopping on the sofa and picking up something to eat and finding themselves there two hours later, feeling perhaps a little bit more rested, but a bit fed up about the whole thing, and that happening night after night. Because I often talk to people who describe situations a bit like that - it's not unfamiliar, that kind of experience. So in terms of reducing friction and adding in maybe some triggers or some prompts to help the desirable behaviours - in a really practical real world setting - what kinds of things can we do if we find ourselves in a situation like that? What could we be doing to make it a bit easier for ourselves?

It's interesting. I mean with something like that, there's isn't necessarily any friction there. You know, there's nothing preventing you from when you get home going out for a run, apart from maybe your fast, automatic, emotional brain that takes over and says, "I'm tired. I just want a nice sit on the sofa". And you almost automatically just go and do that because you're following your natural instincts. And then only later you might realise, "I haven't gone for a run". So in a situation like that, like you say, it's about triggers or prompts probably, so making the thing that you want to do more obvious or attractive or salient in some way. So it might be about when you

are thinking consciously about it, perhaps in the morning, when you think, "Right, I definitely want to go for a run tonight - I'm gonna do it", putting your running shoes in the middle of the floor so that when you open the door when you come home, they're right there and you can't miss them and you're stepping over them to get to the sugary snacks or the sofa. And something as simple as that might just provide the prompt that you need. We talk a lot about being in the right place at the right time, in terms of the tactics that we use and that's often the way with behaviours like this is - you think about it at the wrong moment. You think about, "Oh I must do something, I must do that, I must do that". But then when it comes to the actual moment when you can or should be doing it, you're not thinking about it any more. So more often than not with behavioural interventions we're thinking about where is the behaviour occurring and at what time, the behaviour that we're trying to influence, and how close can we get to that moment in order to influence it? Because otherwise people aren't going to be open to that change. And that's certainly something that people can think about individually, is rather than maybe putting something in their calendar that says, "I'm going to go for a run tonight". You might not look at that at the right time when you want to go for a run, but think about when is the likely time that you're gonna go for a run, put a prompt there in that moment...

Some sort of alarm on your phone perhaps? Or an environmental prompt like you said with the shoes, so you see it at the right moment?

Exactly. I mean I use reminders on my phone all the time because I'm rubbish at remembering things and they're absolutely the right place, right time prompt. I mean you could even set some of those up so they only tell you at a certain location. So as you walk through your front door you could get a little prompt saying, "Go for a run". There are things that are designed to help us.

I don't know if you can explain it - I suspect you would probably understand what's going on in my brain when this happens - but I've noticed that when I set an intention in advance to do something... So if at the start of the day or the day before I made a plan to do something and that included, let's say, going for a run and I was really clear about the fact that I was going to do that - my likelihood of going for a run, having set that intention and possibly written it down, when I get to that point is much greater than if I've got a sort of vague notion that it would be good for me to be doing some running. It's as if I've set time on a mental calendar that I can't see and I find that it's as if I've kind of programmed something so I can find myself doing it even without thinking about doing it. So it's not a habitual behaviour, but it's as if I've set my internal GPS and it's kind of taking in a direction without me really thinking about it. What's happening there? Do you know?

Yeah. Something to kind of warn about, I guess, with intentions is that intentions don't always equal actions, and that's something which we talk about. However intention is a pretty good start. So just being aware of something doesn't mean you're going to do it. Intending to do something gets you step closer, but it still doesn't actually mean you're necessarily going to do it. But I think there was an interesting thing that you just mentioned about possibly writing it down and I think that's potentially the game-changer there. There's a body of theory about commitment and about committing to things that says that if people commit to something and that, ideally, the strongest commitment should be in some way public and also in some way physical, then they're much more likely to follow through with it. So your act of writing down in a calendar note or on a note to yourself on the kitchen table - "Go for a run this evening" - that act makes it much more likely that you will actually follow through with it.

So making it in some way external rather than just inside your own head all of the time. Setting an intention is one thing, but then actually committing to it by taking a physical action of some kind. And so you said also by making that public, so let's say if I called you up and said, "Rob, I'm going to go for a run tomorrow evening at five". That would probably also make me more likely. Is that right?

That would make you much more likely. Yeah. Yeah, so it's almost like a staged thing. Just committing to yourself would definitely make you more likely, but if you did that and told me that you're going to go for a run, potentially even asked me to text at the time to that you were going to go just to make sure, that would make you a whole lot more likely to do it. Essentially, we like to be consistent with our internal promises to ourselves, ideally - that's our ideal mental state - but we also find it easy to get around those internal promises if we haven't made them external. So I think you're absolutely right, it's about externalising those commitments.

So I come home from work. I've set my intention the night before. I've written something down. I've called you up and I've said, "Rob, I'm going to go for this run, perhaps you could send me a text?" So I get home from work. I've got a notification on my phone and then you text me and say, "Katie, have you gone for that run yet?" And I look at my shoes on the floor. All of these things have made it much more likely. (I'm not trying to co-opt you into getting me fit by the way, Rob, this is purely hypothetical.) I'm thinking of other things I could possibly do that would make it less likely that I continued my evening behaviour of flopping on the sofa and eating snacks... Possibly if I had a load of stuff on the sofa, so actually putting a physical obstacle... If I can't sit down on my sofa, if I've got a of washing there that needs sorting - that would be another thing that would stop me from going into default mode, I think. And also if I didn't happen to have the snacks to hand, or they were in some way inaccessible or I really needed to go out to the shops to buy them - all of

those things are creating friction, aren't they, that are going to make it a little bit less likely?

Yeah. That's really interesting because, you know I said earlier on, there isn't necessarily a friction to you not doing it. Creating a friction to doing the wrong thing is really clever. If you had the snacks but you deliberately put them somewhere where you might forget or you wouldn't normally look, that creating friction for the wrong behaviours is a really interesting addition, yeah.

In these conversations I love to try and come up with a *Little Challenge* that people could try for themselves. So are there any elements of what we've been talking about that people can start to be applying in their own lives to help them take more control of how they're behaving?

I think everybody will have something that they have been wanting to do but haven't quite got there yet. There'll be something that they just haven't quite got round to it. And a *Little Challenge* could be recognising that thing and perhaps going through these steps that we've talked about, so first working out is there a barrier or is there friction to me doing that thing and if there is, then looking at ways to get rid of that barrier or reduce that friction. Then thinking about, "Can I make the thing that I want to do more salient?" So the shoes in the middle of the floor example. Thinking about, "How could I make it more obvious for myself to do this thing?" It might be if you're taking some pills and you keep forgetting, you know, where can I put them so I'm not going to miss them. Thirdly, thinking about the right time, right place. So actually I may be thinking about this behaviour quite consciously now because I'm doing the *Little Challenge*, but when it comes to actually doing it, I may not be, so what is the perfect time and place to nudge myself to do this behaviour? And then finally, the commitment piece, so, "Can I find a way to externalise my commitment to myself to do this thing? Can I physically write something down, sign something, whatever it is, and even could I make that public in some way? Could I tell somebody, put on a website? Can I write about in my blog?" And so, so maybe just thinking about whatever it is that you're not doing and try to follow through those steps.

It's really fun stuff when you start playing with it, isn't it? It's amazing how much easier things can become without lots of effort and without lots of willpower, which I think is a significant thing. It doesn't have to be something that is difficult or uncomfortable actually.

Like you said, not flagellating yourself and trying to rely on willpower alone to do stuff, because then you'll just feel guilty and, you know, we all do it all the time.

I see it as kind of gaming the system. We've got certain things running and it's just about how you can use them to your advantage rather than fighting them the whole time.

Yeah, gaming your own system.

Exactly. If people are interested to know more about the work that you do at Behaviour Change and the kind of projects you're involved with, how can they find you online?

So our website is [BehaviourChange.org.uk](https://behaviourchange.org.uk), and that's the English spelling with the 'u'. We've got various case studies of projects that we've done on there. We update that as we complete and evaluate new projects, so there's a reasonable amount of stuff on there including our thoughts on behaviour and what it means. That's probably the best place for that.

Fantastic. And do you have a sense of where this work might go in the future. You obviously have a passion for it. Where would you like it to go for you personally and how do you think it could change things more widely in the world?

I particularly would like to do more on climate change? I mean a lot of the behaviours we work on indirectly affect climate change, you know, energy saving being a very good example, but it's becoming such a pressing issue that we need to find more ways to really make a difference on it using the skills that we have.

It's fascinating to talk with you. I wish we had several times more time to discuss things, but I'm really grateful for your time today, Rob.

Pleasure. Absolute pleasure.