

THE HINDU Business Line

Business Daily from THE HINDU group of publications
Monday, November 28, 2016

The New Manager – Management

Life skill coaching, moving from experiential avoidance to psychological flexibility

T.T. SRINATH

A middle aged CEO of a fairly well reputed multi-specialty hospital sought my assistance in helping him work through some of the challenges he was experiencing in pursuit of his aspirations, primarily at an individual level, yet the impact of his struggles being felt in the organisation that he was overseeing.

He was experiencing the following difficulties in coping with his challenges and these were evidenced as:

- * A tendency for him to be unable to distinguish between the issue and an individual.
- * His stuckness with his past, his anxieties with the future and the rules and judgments that caused an internal chatter in him.
- * A tendency to avoid immersing in the experience that he was currently going through and burying his head, almost 'ostrich-like.'
- * Being distracted, disengaged, disconnected and disassociated with his current reality.
- * Being remote from his values.
- * Essentially grappling with unworkable solutions.

He was therefore experiencing in some ways what Russ Harris, a proponent of what is called 'ACT' or 'Accept and Commitment Therapy' calls, 'psychological rigidity.'

The messages he was giving himself were:

- * Life is difficult
- * My mind is amplifying my pain

Over the last several months I have been working with an interesting and novel therapeutic approach to human self-empowerment and motivation called 'ACT' or 'Acceptance and Commitment Therapy.'

My sensing therefore was to help the incumbent work his dilemmas through this therapeutic process and thereby gain psychological flexibility, which is briefly, to be open, to be present and do what matters.

'ACT' or 'Acceptance and Commitment Therapy is an evidence based psychological intervention that uses acceptance and mindfulness techniques alongside behaviour change strategies to help one live life according what really matters to the individual.'

This therapeutic process was developed around the 1990s by Steven C Hayes along with Kelly Wilson and in recent years has gained eminence due to the pioneering work of Russ Harris.

THEORETICAL CONSTRUCT

ACT says that we must develop psychological flexibility and not resort to experiential avoidance.

Experiential avoidance means, attempting to go away, deny or suppress pain which is caused by the thoughts that erupt in us and these have an impact on our emotions, feelings and actions. ACT says that we must not attempt to push away thoughts that upset, yet try to reframe our relationship with these thoughts.

To achieve this and thereby lead a fulfilling and meaningful existence, three things may be attempted:

* By distancing ourselves, not in a way of pushing a negative thought away, but by embracing it, acknowledging it, and then letting it go, we do what is called defusion. Defusion is different from what we normally tend to do which is to fuse with the thought and thus begin to believe it is real. If we step back from the thought and tell ourselves 'I am thinking these thoughts' it is likely that the influence thoughts hold on us will diminish. In Gestalt 'fusion' is called 'confluence' or a merging of the individual with his thought thus making it indistinguishable for the individual to recognise that he is not the thought.

* If we are able to recognise the values that direct us to living a particular life and we celebrate, acknowledge and live by them it is very likely that we will move towards a fulfilling existence. Values are not goals but direction towards goals. For example if my value is 'to be a loving husband' and my goal is 'to do things for my wife that will make her happy,' then I will constantly practice demonstrating love to her, be accepting of her with her warts and what have you, not place conditions on her or the relationship and thankfully acknowledge her in my heart even if not verbal continuously.

* If I am able to become mindful of my feelings, emotions, thoughts and actions and I am constantly aware of what is happening to me it is possible to reverse negative thoughts. The example is of a torchlight that we shine in a dark room or a chessboard that we play on. The torch shines its light on objects, the beam makes you aware of the objects and the torch watches the direction of the beam and the objects. The torch therefore is unaffected by the beam or object it shines on yet knows that it is watching what it sees. In similar fashion on chessboard the whites and blacks fight it out with one trying to destroy the other. The board remains unaffected and watches the game dispassionately. I therefore become an observer of what is going on around me.

The difference between defusion and self-observation is that, in the first I reframe my relationship with the thought and in the latter I watch without the thought corrupting my emotions and feelings.

In addition to the three aspects pointed above, psychological flexibility can also be achieved through accepting 'what is' in a way that we embrace all that is happening to us without judgment. We are also curious, open and flexible. Contact with the present, that is, living completely in the now and finally creating SMART goals that are realistic and achievable will also help in this process.

There are two languages that we operate through:

- * Public language

- * Private language

Public language is what we utter through words and outward expression. Private language is the thoughts, feelings and internal processes that go on within us. While what we say outside determines the impact that we have on people and their lives and often times feedback is available for public language, private language being a completely internal process has no check back mechanism other than the thoughts and voices that we hear within ourselves. So if for example in public language we utter a distasteful comment, it is very likely that the recipient of our comment will immediately show or make visible his / her reaction and thus we can alter or correct our pattern of speech. In private language however since it is the thought process that generates ideas within us it cannot be neutralised by merely trying to shift our attention. What must be done is to distance ourselves from the thought through the process of self-observation and defusion and thereby neutralise or lessen the impact of the thought.

'ACT' IN ACTION

The aim of ACT is to help people live open fulfilling lives yet this is difficult if time is spent on trying to change, control or avoid things that cannot easily be changed, controlled or avoided. This is particularly true of our thought processes which erupt due to the beliefs that we have incubated and nursed within ourselves from childhood.

ACT therefore prescribes three basic steps:

- * Accept your thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations because you cannot really avoid or control how you think and what you feel.

- * Choose your values and move in that direction by identifying what matters to you and defining how you want to live.

- * Take action by starting to do things that matter to you.

The cause for our suffering is largely because of the private language that we indulge in which often times destabilises us.

Living by our values provides us a sense of direction as they define the meaning and purpose of our lives. Values reflect the things we want our life to represent and stand for. Suffering happens because we embark on trying to avoid or get rid of what we construe as negative thoughts and feelings. The more we don't want something in our life the more it is likely to show up in our lives.

Recent neurological-management studies have revealed that behaviour modification is only possible if there is an understanding of feelings that arise in an individual causing

manifestation of behaviour, appreciation of the thoughts and assumptions that generate such feelings and fundamentally the beliefs that an individual operates from.

Beliefs being formed early in life and continuously being reinforced by life's experiences have to be challenged and the mind reprogrammed in order that one moves from what prevents action, which is the acronym 'FEAR' to the antidote which is the acronym 'DARE'.

FEAR

F- Fusion between thoughts, feelings and emotions

E- Excessive goals those are divorced from reality

* Avoidance of discomfort and staying with pain that is being experienced

R- Removed from values that matter to the individual.

DARE

D- Defuse thoughts and feelings

* Acceptance of discomfort

R- Realistic SMART goals being set

E- Embracing what matters to you, what you care about, what skills values and strengths you can use.

CONCLUSION

Employing 'ACT' in a coaching relationship helps us to move away from what we do that is ineffective that causes us to behave unlike the person we want to be towards what we want to do that is effective and behave like the person we want to be. It moves us in the direction of our values, helps us set realistic goals and take committed action. 'ACT' also helps us move from fusion of our thoughts and feelings to defusion and from avoidance to acceptance.

'ACT', in my experience is a resilience formula that also helps reduce anxiety, increase self-worth and builds self-esteem, get over what happened, have more confidence, stop doubting self and finally, feel calmer.

(The writer is an organisational and behavioural consultant. He can be contacted at ttsrinath@gmail.com)

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