

# Eliciting change talk

## Tutorial

People are more convinced by arguments they have thought about themselves than by arguments that have been presented to them by others. In motivational dialogue we try to elicit statements from the learner that acknowledge that they have some difficulties, that they are anxious about the way things are and want to change, and that life will be better in some way if they do change.

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Eliciting change talk is at the heart of motivational dialogue. When learners increase their change talk, their commitment to change seems to increase too.

An important role for you is to encourage learners to:

- recognise the nature of their problem(s);
- show concern about the effects of their problem(s) on themselves and others;
- explore the strength of their intention to change;
- express their optimism about the possibility of change, and to work with you to strengthen this.

You can encourage talk about change with a mixture of:

- open questions;
- reflections;
- summaries and summaries with bias;
- techniques such as the **Losses and gains analysis** for exploring ambivalence, and the **Scaling tool** for exploring optimism about change.

## Useful questions

### **Problem recognition**

How has this been a problem for you?

How is being late causing you problems?

What difficulties has this caused you?

How does not being able to read cause you problems?

In what ways do you think others have been harmed by your behaviour?

### **Concern**

What do you think will happen if you do not change your behaviour?

How much does your drinking concern you?

What worries you about not being able to control your temper?

How do you feel about your gambling?

What can you imagine happening if you stay at home?

### **Intention to change**

What would be the benefits of learning to read?

What will make you go to the interview this time?

What will be the advantages of changing your behaviour?

The fact that you are talking to me indicates you are concerned, but how can you be sure you want to change?

I can see you still feel unsure. What could make you feel more positive about the move?

### **Optimism**

What makes you think that this time things will be different?

What is different this time compared with last time?

What will make you attend your group work sessions this time, compared with last time?

How do you know that you will not go back to drinking as soon as you face a crisis?

What do you think will work for you if you decide to try to change?

## Traps that reduce the likelihood of eliciting change talk

### Trap 1: persuading through argument

A learner who is not ready to change may signal this by countering every statement you make with reasons for staying as they are.

If you let yourself be drawn into an argument, the learner is likely to experience you as pushing them into a corner. This will trigger defensiveness and more evidence of apparent resistance from the learner, and will be demotivating for both of you.

#### The antidote

Use your skills of questioning and reflective listening (plus the technique of the Losses and gains analysis demonstrated on **CD-ROM 2, Applying skills with techniques**) to encourage learners to articulate their own reasons for change.

### Trap 2: who is the expert?

When you are talking to a learner about a problem, you might find yourself offering advice and guidance before you have explored the learner's own perspective. This is taking responsibility away from the learner and goes against one of the key principles of motivational dialogue. The result can be half-hearted commitment to your suggestions and change, if any, will only be temporary.

#### The antidote

While you are the expert on the E2E programme and what it has to offer, learners are experts on themselves, and what matters to them. So part of your role is to help learners explore their own goals, direction and plans.

The time for you to offer advice is when a learner's motivation for change is high, after you and the learner have explored different ways of making changes. Even then, check your motives for offering it. Does the learner actually want it – or are you offering it to meet a need of your own?

On the other hand, if you believe that a learner is in imminent danger, do not hesitate to give advice.

### Trap 3: premature focus

When you believe that you know what a learner needs in order to be able to change, you may be tempted to focus on this before the learner is ready to do so. This is likely to trigger resistance in the learner.

You also run the risk of focusing on something other than the primary problem.

### **The antidote**

Spend time listening to the learner, asking well-chosen questions and reflecting back empathically what you hear them say.

When you think you have jointly identified the issue, check it out tentatively. For example:

**Tutor:** From what you've been saying, it seems that you see the root of the problem as being your temper. Is that accurate – or is there something else?

## Activity: ABC technique

### Purpose

- To increase awareness of change talk.
- To enable you to do more of what works.

### Description

How to use the ABC<sup>1</sup> (Antecedents–Behaviour–Consequences) technique to structure recall of a conversation with a learner.

### Instructions

When your next scheduled conversation with a learner has finished, and if the learner said anything that suggested:

- recognition of a problem;
- concern;
- intention to change;
- optimism about change;

write down:

- what the learner said (behaviour);
- what came immediately before (antecedents);
- what happened next (consequences).

Under 'Antecedents' include what you remember saying or doing that may have elicited the change talk. For example:

- Did you ask a question that had great meaning for the learner?
- Were you listening intently, using non-verbal reinforcement?
- Did you remain silent, and let the learner follow their train of thought?

Under 'Consequences', include your own response:

- What did you feel, but not express?
- How did you reinforce what the learner said?
- Did your body language change?

<sup>1</sup> In Section 2, Five techniques, we have adapted the ABC technique as Action–Behaviour–Consequences.

## Learning points

What *you* say and do can really help the learner to engage in change talk.

## Activity: Taking things forward

### Purpose

To encourage sharing of insights into what works with learners.

### Description

An informal but focused conversation with colleagues.

### Instructions

Take the information you recorded in the previous activity (ABC) and discuss it with at least one colleague.

Invite your colleague to share similar information with you.

## Learning points

When you and your colleagues share the change talk you have heard from learners, you will be creating a virtuous circle. You and your fellow tutors will have an increasingly positive view of the learner in question. This will influence the way you interact with that learner, which in turn will reinforce more learning-orientated behaviour.

# Notes

