

Verbal Behaviour Analysis Overview



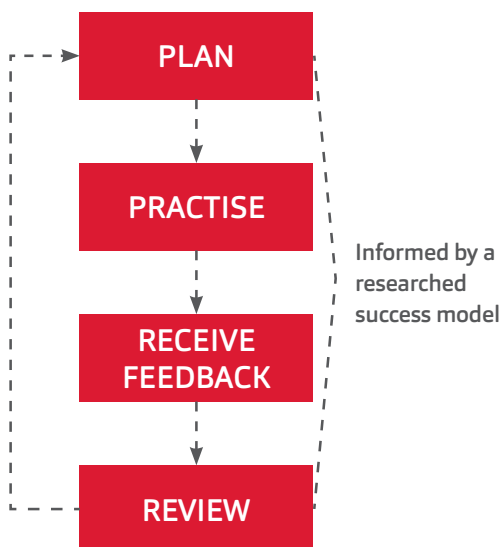
Verbal Behaviour Analysis

What is VBA?

Verbal Behaviour Analysis is a method of measuring the things that people say to each other in a given situation. The main purpose of this measurement is to address a common dilemma for people trying to develop skills – how to obtain helpful feedback.

Measurement and feedback

Schematically, the development of most skills can be characterised by the diagram below:



By doing something repeatedly and modifying one's action in response to reliable feedback, skill improves. This works fine when the feedback involves hard-and-fast outcomes that cannot be disputed. In less precise contexts, such as many forms of communication, it is harder to receive (or offer) feedback that is accurate, objective and usable. Verbal Behaviour Analysis (VBA) is a way of bridging this gap, particularly in the area of verbal behaviour.

Measuring verbal behaviour

Every human being is enormously skilled at carrying out the normal functions of being a person in a complex social world. Many of us are completely unaware of how skilled we are and, more importantly for training purposes, we are very often unaware of exactly how we go about doing what we are so good at.

If we want to find out how a skilled performer goes about being skilled, then we need to measure what is going on. When it comes to measuring physical activity, there are many various techniques for analysing and identifying the ideal golf swing or the 'knack' of a tricky industrial task. Many industrial skills are analysed in this way to make it easy for learners to practise the best method right from the start. But how can this be done for skills like negotiating or selling when there is no physical activity occurring?

We could, of course, ask the skilled performers what it is that they do which guarantees success. Unfortunately this doesn't work too well because the highly skilled often perform their skills automatically with little conscious effort. Research in several disparate areas – of music, sport or selling for instance – has shown that it can be very misleading to ask the experts what is happening. We clearly need a better method of measurement, which is where VBA comes in.

VBA

VBA is a method of putting things that people say into categories. Exactly what the categories are depends to a large extent on what is being measured. The categories could be very simple such as 'Asking Questions' or 'Giving Information'. The categories could be more complex such as those used to analyse negotiation behaviour. Whatever the category is, it must, if it is to be a useful measure, be carefully chosen to meet five basic criteria:

- Easy to understand, that is, it must make sense at a common sense level
- Different to other categories with no overlap
- Possible for it to be measured accurately, a trained listener should be able to recognise it when it occurs, and to a high level of reliability
- Something that people can choose to do or not when they are speaking, hence they can vary how often they use it
- Able to be related to the effectiveness of performance. In other words it should be something that can be easily shown to have some sort of effect on other people, for the better or the worse.

If you look at 'Asking Questions', it should be clear that it meets all five criteria and hence it seems to be a good candidate for use as an analysis category. Having chosen the categories, they can be used to observe people speaking together. It is then possible to identify which categories of verbal behaviour are related to success in particular contexts – teamworking, appraisals, negotiating and so on – and which are not.

Applying VBA

The aim of training is to develop skill. Clearly, it is important to develop the right skills if the training is to be fully effective. The cost effectiveness of training is related to both the speed of the training and the subsequent effectiveness of the person trained. This makes it even more important that the right skills and behaviours are developed right from the start.

VBA provides an excellent method for observing and identifying the factors that are crucial to success in these situations, in other words, of supplying the 'reliable success model' in our schema for skills development.

Huthwaite training programmes are not designed to create experts at VBA – their purpose is to help participants to use the skills that VBA has uncovered. However, VBA is the foundation of each programme.

By observing real-life situations and using various research techniques, including VBA, it has been possible to identify the skills used, for example, by effective presenters, negotiators, and sellers or by managers who must run meetings, appraise or persuade. In this sense, VBA is a key part of all Huthwaite training.




However, it also has another function on each course. The purpose of the programme is to help you to develop appropriate skills. In order to achieve that, it is useful to be able to assess your current strengths and weaknesses so that training can concentrate on the areas you wish to develop. In this sense the VBA that the course tutors perform, provides an objective assessment for each participant. As you practise the skills, the VBA results will show if your skill profile is changing in the way you would wish it to. This offers a chance to practise more effectively as the course progresses.

There is one final word of warning about this practice: it helps if you don't worry about trying to be perfect. All communication has degrees of unpredictability and imperfection. VBA is best viewed as an important tool for minimising these, and for maximising development of the right skills.

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