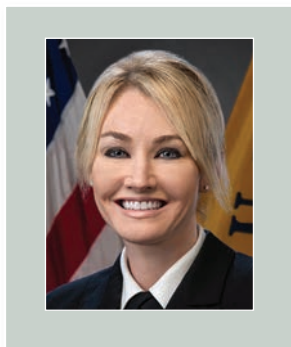


► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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Changing Behavior Through Understanding Values, Perceptions, and Motivations

This President's Message column is my last. It has been an honor to serve as the president of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA). Similar to the presidents who came before me, I have encountered challenges and new opportunities to learn, grow, and evolve. One public health area that has continually captivated my thoughts is the power of behavior change.

As I reflect on my time as NEHA president, I know change is not just about delivering facts or enforcing rules. It is about understanding the heart of what motivates people. It is something that deeply matters to us as environmental health professionals and is at the heart of our mission to protect and improve the well-being of our communities. We want to bring about positive change during the inspection, whether we are explaining an observation during a food inspection or discussing a water issue. Change requires empathy, compassion, and the willingness to see things from the perspective of others. It is about inspiring others to act, to see beyond the moment, and to step toward a healthier, more sustainable future.

The work we do is not easy, and change is never simple. Shifting people's behaviors, especially when it comes to public health and environmental well-being, takes time and patience. It is easy to believe that providing facts alone will drive change, but we know that true transformation happens when we understand the deeper layers of human behavior—our values, our perceptions, and our motivations. It is through understanding each other, with kindness and empathy, that we can create a better tomorrow for all.

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Let us look at a powerful example from history that offers important lessons for us today. According to Boissoneault (2019), the Civil War turned Cleveland, Ohio, into a manufacturing city “almost overnight,” and factories quickly sprouted along the Cuyahoga River, which fueled an economic boom. The river, once a vital lifeline for the community, became choked with pollution, was coated in oil, and was no longer able to be used as a source of healthy drinking water. This economic progress was viewed by some as a symbol of success. The river even caught fire at least 12 times over the years. Yet, amid this destruction and the loss of millions of dollars, some individuals still did not see the consequences of the pollution. In the 1950s, however, the factories closed and >60,000 jobs were lost, and the costs became undeniable. By 1969, when the river caught fire again, the national response was immediate and fierce. In the wake of that fire, the country began to see the true environmental crisis unfolding. The Cuyahoga River became the

face of industrial pollution, and in 1970, it was labeled as “our ecological crisis.”

It took time for people to understand the dire consequences of pollution and to shift their perceptions. Over the years, as thousands of jobs were lost and the long-term effects on public health became clearer, the public's view shifted. This change did not happen because people were simply told facts. It happened because people started to see and feel the consequences of their actions. This transformation in public perception shows us that even when change seems difficult, it is possible when people are ready to confront the truth.

This example serves as a reminder that, when it comes to behavior change, facts alone do not change hearts and minds. We often hear that to make a difference, we must provide the facts. But we know that facts alone do not always drive people to act. Facts can guide decisions, but they do not necessarily inspire change. People's behavior is deeply influenced by how they interpret and relate to the facts, and by if they believe they have control over their actions. People's values, perceptions, and motivations shape how they approach problems and how they make decisions.

The key to creating meaningful change lies in understanding those values. People are driven by what they care about most. For some, it could be saving money or conserving resources. For others, it could be protecting the environment or the health of their families. Take something as simple as turning off the lights when leaving a room. It is a small action, but it has been taught to generations of children as a way to save energy. In my own home, I would hear my parents jokingly say,

“We don’t own stock in GE, turn the lights off when you leave the room.” Others might frame it differently, saying, “We turn off the lights because we care about the environment.” Regardless of the motivation, the outcome is the same—behavior changes when people understand why it matters, when they see the impact of their actions, and when they feel personally connected to the change.

To create real and lasting change, we must recognize that people are emotional beings, not machines. Our emotions, experiences, and perceptions drive the choices we make. And so, if we want to influence behavior, we must first understand the emotional and psychological factors that shape decisions. Change is not just about delivering facts or enforcing rules, it is about understanding the heart of what motivates people. I will

say it again: Change requires a deep empathy, compassion, and the willingness to see things from the perspective of others.

Understanding people’s values, perceptions, and motivations is key to bringing about meaningful and lasting behavioral change. This approach requires empathy, patience, and an openness to seeing things from other people’s perspectives. Whether we are working to protect the environment, improve public health, or encourage more sustainable practices, it is essential to recognize the emotional and psychological factors that influence decision-making. By doing so, we can create more compassionate, effective strategies for change that resonate with people and ultimately lead to a better world for all.

As I step down from my role as NEHA president, I am filled with gratitude for the

opportunity to contribute to our shared goals. I hope that we continue to approach our work with understanding, empathy, and a commitment to positive change. 🌸



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Reference

Boissoneault, L. (2019, June 19). The Cuyahoga River caught fire at least a dozen times, but no one cared until 1969. *Smithsonian magazine*. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/cuyahoga-river-caught-fire-least-dozen-times-no-one-cared-until-1969-180972444/>

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