

Using behavioral science to improve government and business

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Professor Sim Sitkin believes social and behavioral science can make government and business more effective, and is part of a movement tasked with proving it. He co-founded the Behavioral Science & Policy Association (BSPA), which is currently tapping the research community to support the Social and Behavioral Sciences Team at the White House as it identifies promising applications of social and behavioral science research to federal policy. That team just issued the [first report](#) of its

work. Sitkin is also working with other organizations including the U.K. Behavioural Insights Team, spun off from the U.K. government, and has drawn interest from the United Nations.

Sitkin expands on these efforts in a Fuqua Q&A.

Q: How can behavioral science be of use to policy makers?

Although at first glance these actions may appear trivial, the science shows that even slight changes in the wording of communications sent to a specific target group can make a significant difference. In one case, the White House team redesigned the letter that the U.S. military uses to encourage service members to re-enroll in a retirement plan. They added concrete instructions to the email, placed in the postscript, which research shows is one of the first things recipients notice. In the random sample receiving the redesigned letter, the re-enrollment rate increased by 22 percent compared with those receiving the standard letter.

Psychologists working with the UK's National Health Service found that if patients filled out their own reminder cards for the next appointment before leaving their current one, it decreased the no-show rate by 18 percent. Also, when signs were switched from indicating that 5 percent did not keep their appointment to stating that 95 percent did keep their appointment, the no-show rate dropped by 30 percent. That's thousands of fewer people showing up late - saving the [government](#) a lot of money.

Also, Fuqua professors Rick Larrick and Jack Soll conducted research highlighting how automobile gas mileage window stickers were misleading people who used that information to make purchase decisions. Their work helped change the way mileage is displayed in vehicles sold throughout the US.

The point is that rigorous research can lead directly to very practical applications.

Q: Why is this taking hold now?

There's an emerging interest in using evidence among public sector policy makers and business leaders. The idea is that better decisions can be made, and more effective and efficient policies can be developed, if we test ideas before spending millions of dollars on implementing them. We recognized that there was already an openness to social science. Neo-classical economics, which assumes that people act in ways to maximize their self-interest, has had a strong influence in both the public and private sectors. But the other social sciences, which have a lot to offer, have been relatively neglected. There is a lot that's known that's not being used, because it has never been available in an accessible form that speaks directly to practitioners. The idea here is to bridge that gap and to help scientists take their best work that has practical applications and make those applications salient and actionable.

Q: How can you bridge that gap?

First, we are setting up searchable archives of vetted research so people who have to make a decision or recommend a policy recommendation can easily find the best information. Government agencies and corporate decision makers are asking what scientific research might be relevant to solving their most pressing problems. Many groups around the world are running these studies, but there is no searchable database to find them. We also lack a database that goes back into the literature and identifies usable practical insights from past research. The BSPA is in the process of identifying relevant practical, implementable findings and translating them for a general audience. So if a legislator is grappling with a problem around energy, or pre-K education, or a business leader is

grappling with making their organization more innovative, he or she has a place to discover what is known about that issue in the social science research, and know it is reliable because it has been vetted for scientific rigor as well as practical usefulness.

Second, we've started a journal for new studies, Behavioral Science and Policy, with a unique dual review process in which articles are vetted for both their scientific rigor and practical relevance, and then professionally edited to make them accessible to a broad audience. In addition to making already-completed research more accessible, we also want to encourage scientists working today to think about how their work could be of practical use while also getting academic credit by publishing in a highly regarded outlet.

Third, we're trying to foster the creation of communities around practical problems, committees of interdisciplinary scientists, policymakers, private sector [business](#) and potential funders for those efforts so they can be sustainable.

Q: What is the real potential for change here?

If we are successful, the question, 'What is the evidence for that?' should be the first thing leaders and experts should expect to be asked, regardless of what they are proposing. The ready access to evidence will make it easier to call someone's bluff if they claim something is known. It should be as easy to find scientific information as it is to search with Google. There would be a network of vibrant communities that are looking at increasingly important problems and trying to put together the resources and the talent to tackle them. The best scientists would not stop doing basic research - that's absolutely essential - but what they would be adding to their portfolio is much more of an emphasis on basic research that has practical value.

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