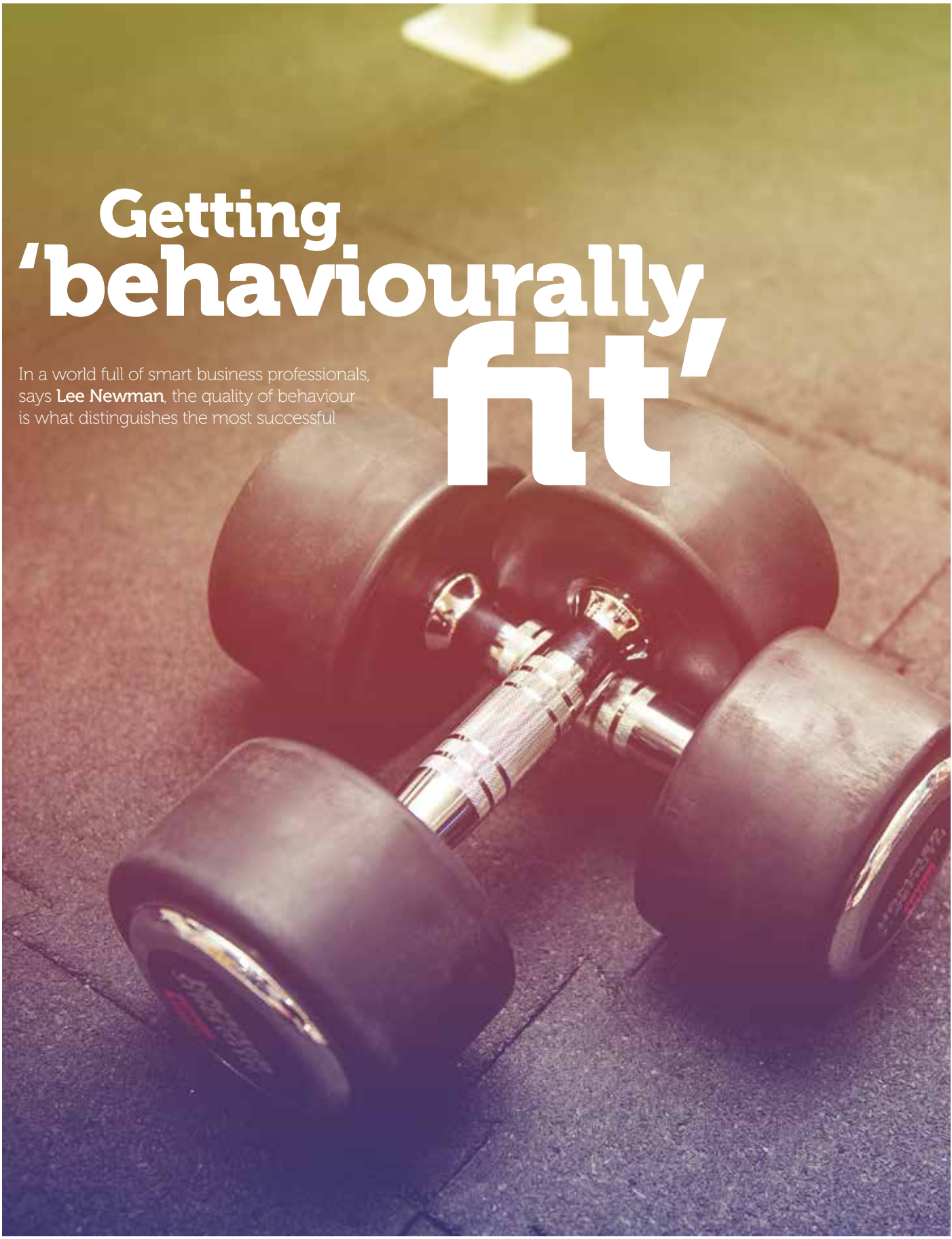

Getting 'behaviourally fit'

In a world full of smart business professionals, says **Lee Newman**, the quality of behaviour is what distinguishes the most successful

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35%

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> *"Those professionals who are the most "behaviourally fit" are the ones who are more likely to succeed – and this comes down to how they behave, in every meeting, conversation, problem solving session, negotiation and interview*

Take two equally intelligent, well-educated professionals with similar years of experience and put them in similar organisations with the same budgets and staff.

One consistently moves ideas forward and shepherds projects to success while the other becomes mired in obstacles, battles, and set-backs. Why? The answer is behaviour.

Being good at the job-specific aspects of one's work is important, yes, but merely the entry ticket to a sustainably successful career. We all know those people at work who are unremarkable at what they do but succeed because of how they do it. And we also know people who are excellent at what they do yet have stalled careers because, again, of how they do it.

Talk to line managers, recruiters and HR staff and they will tell you that what ultimately sets apart two smart employees is not the details of their marketing plans or the specifics of their operational improvement proposals.

Rather, it is how well they listen to colleagues and customers, how open minded they are in considering others' ideas, whether they can learn to trust and not micro-manage, how effectively they can influence and persuade, and their ability to forge positive alliances to marshal resources and gain the buy-in necessary to make things happen. And the list goes on.

Those professionals who are the most "behaviourally fit" are the ones who are more likely to succeed – and this comes down to how they behave, in every meeting, conversation, problem solving session, negotiation and interview. The behaviourally fit have three qualities that others lack: a broader repertoire of behaviours, greater flexibility in calling upon them and more practised execution in the moments that count.

So, how behaviourally fit are most business professionals? Not very – and they admit it (behind closed doors). When I ask a classroom of MBA students "who joins me in being a member of The Bad Listeners Club?" nearly everyone raises a hand and smiles.

I get the same response in corporate workshops, working with recent hires up to the C-suite. And it is not just about underdeveloped listening skills.

What I have found in my teaching and training is that most people, much of the time, find themselves challenged by a wide variety of the behaviours that drive their daily performance at work. These include micromanaging instead of trusting and delegating, losing control over emotions, getting impatient in team meetings, not giving real consideration to others' ideas, difficulty coping with distraction and procrastination, and placing too much emphasis on results to the detriment of people and process.

It's a shame, then, that business schools and corporate universities focus so little on helping professionals develop the in-the-moment behaviours that can boost interpersonal effectiveness, productivity and engagement.

It is not for lack of trying. There are myriad training programmes on offer and every business school curriculum includes a share of soft-skills classes – it's just that the current methods do not work well.

Last year, companies spent $130 billion on training, 35% of which went on leadership skills. Yet, despite this, the overwhelming majority of employees across countries and industries are not highly engaged.

(See *The Corporate Learning Factbook 2014* (Bersin by Deloitte), *State of the Global Workplace 2013* (Gallup), *2012 Global Workforce Study* (Towers-Perrin) and *Driving Performance and Retention Through Employee Engagement* (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004).

When behaviours are not reasonably refined, the day-to-day working environment becomes difficult at best and engagement and productivity suffer.

What is needed is a radical shift in emphasis from training business acumen to training behaviours. And not only a shift in emphasis but a shift in methodology as well.

We need to move beyond theories of organisations, teams and personality and beyond the classroom roleplays that are already taking place in business school classrooms and break-out sessions. Business students need to experiment and to fine-tune their workplace behaviours on a daily basis across the 12-24 months of their programme.

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Let's be honest: A student's ability to listen is not *really* getting challenged during a 20-minute classroom role-play dedicated to "active listening". But it's in their daily work when students stop listening to each other, fail to give consideration to their teammates' ideas, lose control over their emotions, and when inquiry loses out to fighting simply to win arguments.

And it is in these moments – the class discussions, team projects, individual assignments, in-school start-ups, and community outreach projects – when students should be exercising and strengthening their behavioural muscles and creating good habits that last.

This is what I call "Behavioural Fitness". It means training behaviours in real working conditions in the same way that we train our bodies at the gym. Identify areas for development, craft a plan…and then get to the hard work of getting fit.

The current behavioural training paradigm in business schools is equivalent to learning about getting physically fit and then lifting a few light weights. And that's about it.

The result is that MBA graduates re-enter the workforce knowing a lot more about strategy, finance, marketing and operations but in the difficult moments that they face daily in the workplace, most are no better equipped than they were prior to their graduation .

Yes, they can write better marketing plans and present these with greater confidence. However, when it comes to having the flexible repertoire of behaviours needed to resolve disagreements and get others to buy into their plans, the soft-skills frameworks and best-practices learned in school just does not translate into practised behaviours that will serve them well in the moments that matter.

This is a pity because the explosion of research in the behavioural and neural sciences offers a new and exciting basis for not only better identifying and understanding performance-critical behaviours but also for how we might train them.

Behaviour training needs to happen on a daily basis and it needs to be *in situ*.

To make this happen, behavioural training needs to be given a greater share of business school curricula. We must redesign existing organisational behaviour and soft-skills courses so that they leave students with the same kinds of workout plans and support mechanisms that they get when they go to the gym.

And these need to be complemented by structural changes in what students do on a daily basis so that their interactions, meetings and projects are not only about deliverables and outcomes but also about behavioural development.

We need to give students more assessment tools and real-time feedback technologies so that when they test drive new behaviours in their daily work – more mindful listening, a technique for regulating emotions, a different way to handle conflicts – they can find out from team members how well they are progressing.

Behaviour change is notoriously difficult but business schools should not throw in the towel. A new approach to behavioural business education is necessary, possible and should be near the top of every school's agenda.

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Business students need to experiment and to fine-tune their workplace behaviours on a daily basis across the 12-24 months of their programme, rather than solely in classroom-based roleplays

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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