Stand up for change

Illusory superiority is the cognitive bias that makes many of us feel that we are better than other people. There are, for instance, more drivers who rate their driving as being above average than there are drivers. It’s sometimes called the Lake Wobegon effect after the fictional town where, in Garrison Keller’s immortal words: “...all the women are strong, all the men are good looking, and all the children are above average.” Social psychologists have many theories to explain this phenomenon, ranging from egotism to how we process information in a crowded mental market. I started to think about this when hearing someone speaking about change that was going on in their organisation. The problem was, according to this person, that no-one wanted to change because they were all happy in their comfort zone. He, of course, was ready, willing, and able to embrace the future; it was the others who were the problem. As you may have guessed, the sentiments he expressed were pretty much exactly what other people were also saying. Everyone, or so it seemed, was ready to break away from the status quo but they were waiting for someone else to take the first step.

Convention is a funny thing. Much as we may rail against the conformity of traditional social norms, few of us really want to change things. We say we will and we accuse others of being less open to new thinking and behaviours, but actually we conform more often than we challenge. As JK Galbraith said: “The conventional view serves to protect us from the painful job of thinking.” Two small but interesting examples come to mind. The first is the wearing of hats. Hats are sensible things to wear. They keep one’s head warm and dry in winter and, in summer, protect us from the strong rays of the sun. Recently I have been in two cities during very hot weather. The vast majority of people were hatless. There were some caps and there were some ladies using umbrellas as parasols. Hats were rarely seen. Why is that? We all know it is a good idea.
It was once the norm to wear hats, so why has it dropped out of fashion? So if we all know that wearing hats is a sensible idea, what has to happen before we all start sporting them again?

The other example is the recent campaign on social media by the famous athlete @SallyGunnellHL. She is passionate about the benefits of good posture and, in particular, of standing up. Again, we all know that sitting, badly or not, for long periods is not good for us. Instinctively we feel better when we’re upright. We know that the human skeleton was designed for walking and standing rather than sitting and slouching (we’re actually designed to crouch rather than sit), and yet how many of us spend significant periods of our waking lives sitting hunched over our desks. It’s not good for us and we know it. We know that we should work standing up, so why don’t we make the first move? Some of it is because we don’t like to step outside societal norms and some of it is the illusion that we’d like to but that we’re concerned that others wouldn’t. Either way, it seems, a bad back is preferable to looking silly.

One recent approach to creating positive change is the Nudge theory. The government now employs a team of behavioural scientists who aim to find ways of getting us to do the right thing without being either told or mandated to do it. Healthy living – smoking and drinking less, exercising more, and eating more fruit – are all areas where the team are trying to find ways for us to change our lifestyles. The insight is, of course, that change comes from within. If we’re told to do something we’re unlikely to see it through simply because it is not our decision. If we think that it’s our idea then any behavioural change is likely to be more sustainable.

One aspect of the nudge approach is availability. Seeing new things and having access to them forms images in our minds. This, in turn, makes them seem normal or, indeed, fashionable. And, because we do often behave like sheep, when everyone else starts to do something then we do as well. What was once beyond the social pale becomes the norm.
So here are two predictions for you. The first is that standing desks will soon become an accustomed sight in offices around the country. As a result, meetings will be shorter and more productive and fewer cases of back pain will be recorded. The second prediction is based on a real observation. Two new hat shops have opened in Jermyn Street. Just as the beard made an unexpected comeback recently, so too has the time arrived when hats once more become socially acceptable. So hat’s off to that.