

Why change is difficult: Building new habits

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In our last article, we gave you reasons why it is important for you to take a lead role in the change process for your organization. We also acknowledged this can be very difficult. In this article we will address the reasons why it is difficult to change, and give you some structured tips on practicing the art of adopting new habits. There are three main points we will identify and discuss.

- Our brains are designed for efficiency. They minimize energy usage by moving thinking patterns from the high energy process to low energy processes. This is the formation of habits.
- Forming and changing habits requires us to be mindful and focused. We have to be intentional and conscious in analyzing how our own habits are keeping us in a rut and preventing us from reaching extraordinary achievement.
- We need to challenge ourselves to practice regularly to establish new habits. We should be mindful of habits that are needed for effective problem solving. The brain is like a muscle: it is vulnerable to fatigue. Consequently, one can reasonably expect that change occurs slowly – one habit at a time.

Have you ever driven a car in England? First, you climb into the driver's seat, on the right side of the car, creating a feeling of awkwardness. Then, you pull out of the parking lot and onto the left side of the road, enhancing the feeling of awkwardness. If you are a driver who has been trained in the United States, you are perfectly capable of driving in this completely different environment, but you must be mindful of every move you make in this new setting – much like

being a first time driver all over again. You are focused and conscious of each move, leaving very little mindshare for other things like deep conversations, taking in the beauty of the countryside, or roadside markers. What used to be a habit no longer is.

Creating habits is a part of life. The mechanism for creating habits is a biological reality. It happens as a result of being a part of different cultures, different experiences. Driving is one example of how habits are formed, but habit formation takes place every day from childhood until adulthood. And - those habits that are formed earlier will affect your current condition. Are all habits one learns early optimal, or even appropriate, for later in life? Almost certainly no. Are all habits one learned in school, a first job, or an abandoned career, optimal, or even appropriate, in other settings? Almost certainly no. Are all habits one learned in a particular culture or organization optimal, or even appropriate, in other cultures or organizations? Almost certainly no. Despite this, all these habits are laid down in neural networks and will manifest themselves as behavior in your everyday life. Therefore, recognizing how our habits correlate to organizational performance is critical to creating a problem solving and learning culture.

Why changing habits is hard

Humans are cognitive misers. In order to process as much information as we can, we rely on heuristics, or short cuts based on biases, so as not to overly tax our cognitive system. This is what Daniel Kahneman calls 'System 1' thinking. These fast actions and behaviors are programmed in our basal ganglia. Mindfulness, therefore, is not necessarily comfortable for us and it takes concerted effort. In organizations, we copy cultural behaviors without any significant thought. Not only is it difficult for us to replace these behaviors, which have now become habit, with new ones, we also have significant reservations about going against the grain of the prevailing culture.

It may be hard, but it can be done!

The book *The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg offers some insight into habit formation. There are three components: cue, routine, and reward. These components work in concert and are required for habits to take hold. Changing a habit requires some deep analysis of these components along with some experimentation. He suggests the following four steps for changing a habit:

1. *Identify the routine.* Pay attention to your patterns. Identify the cue that triggers the routine or habit. Then, look for the reward you receive as a result of the routine. Creating awareness of this sequence enables you to go to step 2.
2. *Experiment with rewards.* Analyze the reward you receive as a result of the habit. For example, you may get a great feeling about immediately responding to emails. Through reflection, you may find that that feeling comes from positive reinforcements from your parents for not procrastinating on your homework when you were young. You can experiment with replacing rewards to help change the habit of responding to email interruptions. You might try to bundle reading emails during a certain time of day and reward yourself with your own feeling of accomplishment for making the change.
3. *Isolate the cue.* The cue is what actually sets the automatic habit or routine in motion. For example, the sound of your smart phone is the cue for the email. If you turn off the sound, you have eliminated this cue.
4. *Create a plan.* Craft a plan, write it down, and then experiment with it. Keep track of what works and does not. Make corrections along the way. You might want to keep a journal of habits that you are paying attention to as well as new habits you want to try to create.

Finally, you need to believe you can take control of your habits. If your state of mind is that you probably will not succeed, then you have created a subconscious blockage to your success. The old adage holds true, “If you believe it, you can achieve it.”

Additional support for changing habits

In his book, *Smart Thinking*, Dr. Art Markman supports the concepts from *The Power of Habit*, but emphasizes the technique of replacing habits through repetition. He states that we want and need habits - good habits - in order to free up mental capacity for thinking that requires more attention.

Additionally, the Gestalt principle of self-awareness plays an important role in changing habits. We all have some highly developed skills and some less developed skills. Often our highly developed skills keep us from enabling others to develop. For example, a manager who has been in a particular business for many years may have acquired heuristics for most of the business challenges he faces. By immediately responding to any given situation, he is preventing others in the organization from learning by experience. It takes personal awareness to open the space for others to respond and learn in their own way.

What we have learned from the Lean community about running experiments and applying the discipline of PDCA (Plan-Do-Check-Adjust) is a basic process for changing both personal habits and organizational habits. If you can practice and experiment with yourself as you are running experiments on organizational problems, the synergy becomes more effective. Reflect as a group on experiments you have run. Pay attention to the needs of external customers and run experiments around solving these problems. PDCA is a discipline that will help you to respond to the marketplace more quickly and therefore begin to develop faster response times from the organization. And if you practice PDCA on a personal level, it will be easier for other members

of the organization to use this practice themselves. PDCA is a way of building both personal and organizational habits.

Your first practice: from knower to learner

Most of us reached our current position because of our problem-solving capabilities and the additional knowledge we have acquired through our experiences about how the business works. Because of all that we *know*, it is difficult for us to deploy responsibility to our employees. When an employee is in the position to learn something new, we may ask questions to try to help her. These questions are leading, based on our own expectation of what will work, and this removes the opportunity for the employees to learn how to approach problems themselves. This habit of telling people what we know, even if it is intended to help or guide them, is a great place to begin our practice of changing habits. We can pay attention to our behavior and change our guiding questions to humble inquiry in order to enable our employees to take responsibility for problem-solving thinking.

First, begin to identify the patterns you use when asking your employees questions. Most likely, your questions are guiding them to the right answer, but what you want to do is ask questions that are open-ended for the purpose of having them think through all of the available information, both for the sake of pure inquiry, and to develop them as creative, independent workers.

Consider the differences in the questions listed below:

- *What is currently happening?* Versus: *Can you tell me about the handoff problem?*
- *What have you actually heard or seen?* Versus: *Is it Bob who is causing the problem?*

- *What are your thoughts about what should be happening? Versus: Are the people talking to each other every day?*

Questions for the purpose of pure inquiry give no indication of the “asker’s” thoughts on the topic. True open-ended questions allow for any possible answer, and allow for learning how the other person is thinking about solving the problem. This process may take longer, but it will help the person on the other end truly think through all possible options before moving forward. Plus, you will learn much more about the situation.

Next, think about the rewards you glean from asking guided questions. The most common reward is that the work is accomplished more quickly and is accomplished the way *you* want it to be. Consider a different reward: perhaps one where the employee goes through the entire problem-solving process on his or her own, and perhaps creates an even better outcome than you would have predicted.

Following your consideration of rewards, begin to identify the cue. The cue for your behavior may simply be the fact that someone has asked you a question. Identifying this cue will allow you to change your reaction when an employee comes to you with his next question.

Finally, create a plan. Be mindful of how you want to practice changing this habit of being a knower into the habit of being a learner. Identify multiple ways in which you can change your reaction to inquiries from others in the organization. Perhaps you can even carry this plan outside of work into your personal and family relationships. If you want to have a little fun, practice on strangers. Ask open ended questions to the person sitting next to you on a plane or the person behind you in line for coffee. You never know what you might learn!

Conclusion

Changing habits requires mindfulness and practice. Habits are pervasive and “sticky”; they affect our behavior at work and at home. The more we can focus on practicing changing habits, the more effective we will become in changing them. Creating change in yourself is the first step to successful organizational change.

References

The Power of Habit – Charles Duhigg

Smart Thinking – Dr. Art Markmann

Helping – Dr. Edgar Schein