

Good habits reap good results

Have you ever thought about how much of what you do everyday is a function of habits?

Do you think about brushing your teeth or is it something you just do? Do you think about how to get in, start and drive your car or is it all auto-pilot? When your child is injured do you think about how to respond or do you immediately jump into action?

We might think that our daily lives are the result of thoughtful planning and conscious discipline. But Wendy Wood, a behavioral change psychologist at the University of Southern California, states that “about 45 percent of what people do everyday is in the same environment and is repeated.” In other words, a large percentage of the actions people perform are purely out of habit, not the result of conscious decision-making.

And that’s a good thing because why would we want to sacrifice valuable brain energy on mundane tasks when we could invest that energy to achieve more important matters?

Charles Duhigg, a New York Times reporter and author of “The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business,” writes that the brain does not distinguish between good and bad habits. In this remarkable book, Duhigg defines a three-step habit loop as the cue or trigger for an automatic behavior to develop: cue, routine, reward. The habit becomes more automatic as the cue and reward become neurologically intertwined.

But not all habits are created equal.

Duhigg defines how Alcoholic Anonymous effectively uses the three-step loop process to change behavior. The secret to their success is in assigning a sponsor

to each new member. When the person feels the urge to drink, instead of reaching for alcohol, they reach out to someone who cares about them. This changes the routine. Their old routine of drinking is replaced with the emotionally satisfying action of human conversation. What’s surprising is that these conversations typically don’t center on drinking so much as general topics of interest.

This validates the theory that people seldom eliminate habits; the existing brain wiring remains. Rather, old habits are overshadowed by a better alternative and new routine.

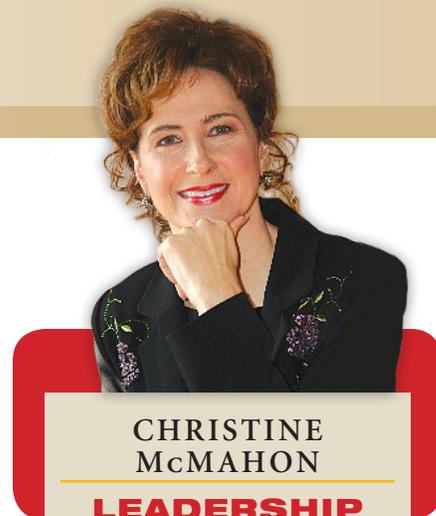
Psychologist David Neal in a recent NPR interview said, “Our environments come to unconsciously direct our behavior. For a smoker, the view of the entrance to their office building, which is a place that they go to smoke all the time, becomes a powerful mental cue to go and perform that behavior.”

Over time, cues become neurologically ingrained and routine.

Since the brain doesn’t differentiate between good or bad even when it involves the things we don’t want to do, like smoking cigarettes or sitting on the couch at night watching TV and eating ice cream, habits develop in spite of our best intentions.

Habits are even ingrained in the fabric of our work environments, sometimes to the extreme.

In his book, Duhigg recounts the story of Paul O’Neill, who took the helm as president and CEO of Alcoa in October 1987. At O’Neill’s first press conference, he deviated from the usual corporate growing sales or improving profitability script, proclaiming that his one objective was “to improve safety.” This shocked reporters



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and investors alike. Attendees thought he was crazy; many rushed from the room to call clients advising them to sell their stock immediately. But what they didn’t comprehend was the power behind his message.

O’Neill understood that he needed to break down success barriers by getting all stakeholders, including the union and Alcoa’s vast workforce, working together. To accomplish this he needed to change their habit of accepting the status quo; it was no longer acceptable for people to get hurt or killed on the job. By focusing on the value of human life, all parties felt compelled to participate and ultimately abolished the silo mentality that had developed over time.

O’Neill further demonstrated his commitment by requiring all accidents to be reported to him immediately; and then within 48 hours, the responsible department manager had to present their solution to him so similar issues would be averted in the future.

This gave O’Neill the leverage he needed to focus on the weak links without triggering conflict between the different stakeholders - nobody wanted to be viewed as valuing a position on an issue more than a human life.

The process worked flawlessly. When managers complained that they couldn’t reach O’Neill within 48 hours because of inadequate technology, he immediately created a committee who was responsible for assessing the needs, making recommendations and then overseeing the implementation of the plan. Mission accomplished!

O’Neill encouraged every employee to

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submit their suggestions, which he reinforced when he visited each plant. He would tell plant workers, "If your management doesn't follow up on safety issues, then call me at home. Here's my number." When workers did call, it wasn't to discuss incidents, but rather to offer suggestions to improve safety. They wanted to be part of the solution.

O'Neill drove Alcoa's success in part because he demonstrated the behavior he wanted others to follow. He took full responsibility for each incident. After one particular accident resulting in an employee death, O'Neill bluntly stated, "We killed this man. It's my failure of leadership. I caused his death. And it's the failure of all of you in the chain of command."

Within a year, O'Neill successfully changed the routine driving the accident rate at Alcoa down to about 5 percent of the national average. Simultaneously, Alcoa's profits soared to record levels. By the time O'Neill retired in 2000, Alcoa's stock was worth five times more than when he started.

Duhigg points out that "Small wins fuel transformative changes by leveraging tiny advantages into patterns that convince people that bigger achievements are within reach." O'Neill proved and demonstrated this in spades.

As business leaders, what personal routine can you shift to generate a series of small wins that transform to become stellar achievements? And what business routines can you shift or impact to create a series of small wins that transform into stellar achievements?

What are you waiting for? There's no better time to get started than right now! ■

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