



The Power of Habit

Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business

THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

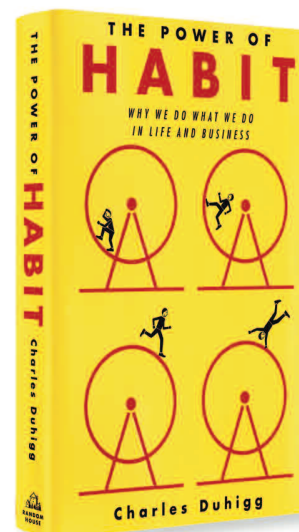
In *The Power of Habit*, Charles Duhigg, award-winning business reporter for *The New York Times*, takes us to the thrilling edge of scientific discoveries that explain why habits exist and how they can be changed. By distilling vast amounts of information into engrossing narratives, Duhigg brings to light a whole new understanding of human nature and its potential for transformation.

Along the way, we learn why some people and companies struggle to change, despite years of trying, while others seem to remake themselves overnight. We visit laboratories where neuroscientists explore how habits work and where they reside in our brains. We discover how the right habits were crucial to the successful promotion of Pepsodent; to Tony Dungy who led his team to a Super Bowl win by changing one step in his players' habit loop; and to Alcoa when it turned itself around by changing just one routine within the organization.

At its core, *The Power of Habit* contains an exhilarating argument: The key to exercising regularly, losing weight, raising exceptional children, becoming more productive, building revolutionary companies and social movements, and achieving success is understanding how habits work. By harnessing this new science, we can transform our businesses, our communities and our lives.

IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- Why the brain tries to make routines into habits.
- How cravings create and power new habits.
- How to apply the golden rule of habit change.
- What “keystone habits” are and the importance of them in creating a new routine.



by Charles Duhigg

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THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: THE POWER OF HABIT

by Charles Duhigg

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Introduction

When you woke up this morning, what did you do first? Did you hop in the shower, check your email or grab a doughnut from the kitchen counter? Did you brush your teeth before or after you towed off? Which route did you drive to work? When you got home, did you put on your sneakers and go for a run, or pour yourself a drink and eat dinner in front of the TV?

“All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits,” William James wrote in 1892. Most of the choices we make each day may feel like the products of well-considered decision making, but they’re not. They’re habits. And though each habit means relatively little on its own, over time, the meals we order, whether we save or spend, how often we exercise, and the way we organize our thoughts and work routines have enormous impacts on our health, productivity, financial security and happiness. One paper published by a Duke University researcher in 2006 found that more than 40 percent of the actions people performed each day weren’t actual decisions, but habits.

James — like countless others, from Aristotle to Oprah — spent much of his life trying to understand why habits exist. But only in the past two decades have scientists and marketers really begun understanding how habits work — and, more important, how they change. At one point, we all consciously decided how much to eat and what to focus on when we got to the office, how often to have a drink or when to go for a jog. Then we stopped making a choice, and the behavior became automatic. It’s a natural consequence of our

neurology. And by understanding how it happens, you can rebuild those patterns in whichever way you choose. ●

PART I: THE HABITS OF INDIVIDUALS

The Habit Loop: How Habits Work

Within the building that houses the Brain and Cognitive Sciences department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) are laboratories that contain what, to the casual observer, look like dollhouse versions of surgical theaters. There are tiny scalpels, small drills, and miniature saws less than a quarter inch wide attached to robotic arms. Even the operating tables are tiny, as if prepared for child-sized surgeons. Inside these laboratories, neurologists cut into the skulls of anesthetized rats, implanting tiny sensors that can record the smallest changes inside their brains.

These laboratories have become the epicenter for a quiet revolution in the science of habit formation, and the experiments unfolding explain how we develop the behaviors necessary to make it through each day. The rats in these labs have illuminated the complexity that occurs inside our heads whenever we do something as mundane as brush our teeth or back the car out of the driveway.

Toward the center of the skull is a golf ball-sized lump of tissue that is similar to what you might find inside the head of a fish, reptile or mammal. This is the basal ganglia, an oval of cells that, for years, scientists didn’t



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understand very well, except for suspicions that it played a role in diseases, such as Parkinson's.

In the early 1990s, the MIT researchers began wondering if the basal ganglia might be integral to habits as well. They noticed that animals with injured basal ganglia suddenly developed problems with tasks, such as learning how to run through mazes or remembering how to open food containers. They decided to experiment by employing new micro-technologies that allowed them to observe, in minute detail, what was occurring within the heads of rats as they performed dozens of routines. Ultimately, each animal was placed into a T-shaped maze with chocolate at one end.

The maze was structured so that a rat was positioned behind a partition that opened when a loud click sounded. Initially, when the rat heard the click and saw the partition disappear, it would usually wander up and down the center aisle, sniffing in corners and scratching at walls. It appeared to smell the chocolate, but couldn't figure out how to find it. When it reached the top of the T, it often turned to the right, away from the chocolate, and then wandered left, sometimes pausing for no obvious reason. Eventually, most animals discovered the reward. But there was no discernable pattern in their meanderings. It seemed as if each rat was taking a leisurely, unthinking stroll.

The probes in the rats' heads, however, told a different story. While each animal wandered through the maze, its brain — and in particular, its basal ganglia — worked furiously. Each time a rat sniffed the air or scratched a wall, its brain exploded with activity, as if analyzing each new scent, sight and sound. The rat was processing information the entire time it meandered.

The scientists repeated the experiment, again and again, watching how each rat's brain activity changed as it moved through the same route hundreds of times. A series of shifts slowly emerged. The rats stopped sniffing corners and making wrong turns. Instead, they zipped through the maze faster and faster. And within their brains, something unexpected occurred: As each rat learned how to navigate the maze, its mental activity decreased. As the route became more and more automatic, each rat started thinking less and less.

It was as if the first few times a rat explored the maze, its brain had to work at full power to make sense of all the new information. But after a few days of running the same route, the rat didn't need to scratch the walls or smell the air anymore, and so the brain activity associated with scratching and smelling ceased. It didn't need to choose which direction to turn, and so decision-making centers of the brain went quiet. The rat had inter-

nalized how to sprint through the maze to such a degree that it hardly needed to think at all.

But that internalization relied upon the basal ganglia, the brain probes indicated. This tiny, ancient neurological structure seemed to take over as the rat ran faster and faster and its brain worked less and less. The basal ganglia was central to recalling patterns and acting on them. The basal ganglia, in other words, stored habits even while the rest of the brain went to sleep.

The Automatic Routine of 'Chunking'

This process — in which the brain converts a sequence of actions into an automatic routine — is known as "chunking," and it's at the root of how habits form. There are dozens — if not hundreds — of behavioral chunks that we rely on every day. Some are simple: You automatically put toothpaste on your toothbrush before sticking it in your mouth. Some, such as getting dressed or making the kids' lunch, are more complex.

Habits, scientists say, emerge because the brain is constantly looking for ways to save effort. Left to its own devices, the brain will try to make almost any routine into a habit, because habits allow our minds to ramp down more often. This effort-saving instinct is a huge advantage. An efficient brain allows us to stop thinking constantly about basic behaviors, such as walking and choosing what to eat, so we can devote mental energy to inventing spears, irrigation systems and, eventually, airplanes and video games.

The process within our brains is a three-step loop. First, there is a *cue*, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then there is the *routine*, which can be physical, mental or emotional. Finally, there is a *reward*, which helps your brain figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future. Over time, this loop — cue, routine, reward; cue, routine, reward — becomes more and more automatic. The cue and reward become intertwined until a powerful sense of anticipation and craving emerges. Eventually, a habit is born.

Habits aren't destiny. Habits can be ignored, changed, or replaced. But the reason the discovery of the habit loop is so important is that it reveals a basic truth: When a habit emerges, the brain stops fully participating in decision making. It stops working so hard, or diverts focus to other tasks. So unless you deliberately fight a habit — unless you find new routines — the pattern will unfold automatically.

According to Ann Graybiel, a scientist at MIT who oversaw many of the basal ganglia experiments, "Habits never really disappear. They're encoded into the struc-

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tures of our brain ... The problem is that your brain can't tell the difference between bad and good habits, and so if you have a bad one, it's always lurking there, waiting for the right cues and rewards."

Without habit loops, our brains would shut down, overwhelmed by the minutiae of daily life. ●

The Craving Brain: How to Create New Habits

One day in the early 1900s, a prominent American executive named Claude C. Hopkins was approached by an old friend with a new business idea. The friend had discovered an amazing product, he explained, that he was convinced would be a hit. It was a toothpaste, a minty, frothy concoction he called "Pepsodent." This venture, the friend promised, was going to be huge. If, that is, Hopkins would consent to help design a national promotional campaign.

Hopkins, at the time, was at the top of a booming industry that had hardly existed a few decades earlier: advertising. He had turned dozens of previously unknown products — Quaker Oats, Goodyear Tires, the Bissell carpet sweeper, Van Camp's pork and beans — into household names. And, in the process, he had made himself so rich that his best-selling autobiography, *My Life in Advertising*, devoted long passages to the difficulties of spending so much money.

Hopkins' Rules

Hopkins was best known for a series of rules he coined explaining how to create new habits among consumers. These rules would transform industries and eventually become conventional wisdom among marketers, educational reformers, public health professionals, politicians and CEOs.

When his friend approached Hopkins about Pepsodent, the ad man expressed only mild interest. It was no secret that the health of Americans' teeth was in steep decline. As the nation had become wealthier, people had started buying larger amounts of sugary, processed foods. When the government started drafting men for World War I, so many recruits had rotting teeth that officials said poor dental hygiene was a national security risk.

Yet, as Hopkins knew, selling toothpaste was financial suicide. The problem was that hardly anyone bought toothpaste because, despite the nation's dental problems, hardly anyone brushed their teeth.

"I finally agreed to undertake the campaign if he gave me a six months' option on a block of stock," Hopkins wrote. The friend agreed.

It would be the wisest financial decision of Hopkins's life. Within five years of the partnership, Hopkins turned Pepsodent into one of the best-known products on earth and, in the process, helped create a toothbrushing habit that moved across America with startling speed. A decade after the first Pepsodent campaign, pollsters found that toothbrushing had become a ritual for more than half the American population. Hopkins had helped establish toothbrushing as a daily activity.

The secret to his success, Hopkins would later boast, was that he had found a certain kind of cue and reward that fueled a particular habit. It's an alchemy so powerful that even today the basic principles are still used by video game designers, food companies, hospitals, and millions of salespeople around the world.

So what, exactly, did Hopkins do?

He created a craving. And that craving, it turns out, is what makes cues and rewards work. That craving is what powers the habit loop.

Creating a Craving to Power a Habit

To sell Pepsodent, Hopkins needed a trigger that would justify the toothpaste's daily use. He sat down with a pile of dental textbooks. "It was dry reading," he later wrote. "But in the middle of one book I found a reference to the mucin plaques on teeth, which I afterward called 'the film.' That gave me an appealing idea. I resolved to advertise this toothpaste as a creator of beauty. To deal with that cloudy film."

In focusing on tooth film, Hopkins was ignoring the fact that this same film has always covered people's teeth and hadn't seemed to bother anyone. Toothpaste didn't do anything to help remove the film. In fact, one of the leading dental researchers of the time said that all toothpastes — particularly Pepsodent — were worthless.

That didn't stop Hopkins from exploiting his discovery. Here, he decided, was a cue that could trigger a habit. Soon, cities were plastered with Pepsodent ads.

"Note how many pretty teeth are seen everywhere," read one ad featuring smiling beauties. "Millions are using a new method of teeth cleansing. Why would any woman have dingy film on her teeth? Pepsodent removes the film!"

The brilliance of these appeals was that they relied upon a cue — tooth film — that was universal and impossible to ignore. Telling someone to run their tongue across their teeth, it turned out, was likely to

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cause them to run their tongue across their teeth and, when they did, they were likely to feel a film. Hopkins had found a cue that was simple, had existed for ages, and was so easy to trigger that an advertisement could cause people to comply automatically.

Moreover, the reward, as Hopkins envisioned it, was even more enticing. Who, after all, doesn't want to be more beautiful? Who doesn't want a prettier smile? Particularly when all it takes is a quick brush with Pepsodent?

In the third week, demand exploded. There were so many orders for Pepsodent that the company couldn't keep up. Within a decade, Pepsodent was one of the top-selling goods in the world, and remained America's best-selling toothpaste for more than 30 years.

Before Pepsodent appeared, only 7 percent of Americans had a tube of toothpaste in their medicine chests. A decade after Hopkins's ad campaign went nationwide, that number had jumped to 65 percent. By the end of World War II, the military downgraded concerns about recruits' teeth because so many soldiers were brushing every day.

Find a Cue, Define the Rewards

The key, Hopkins said, was that he had "learned the right human psychology." That psychology was grounded in two basic rules:

First, find a simple and obvious cue.

Second, clearly define the rewards.

If you get those elements right, Hopkins promised, it was like magic. Look at Pepsodent: He had identified a cue — tooth film — and a reward — beautiful teeth — that had persuaded millions to start a daily ritual. Even today, Hopkins's rules are a staple of marketing textbooks and the foundation of millions of ad campaigns.

Unlike other pastes of the period, Pepsodent contained citric acid, as well as doses of mint oil and other chemicals. Pepsodent's inventor used those ingredients to make the toothpaste taste fresh, but they had another, unanticipated effect as well. They're irritants that create a cool, tingling sensation on the tongue and gums.

After Pepsodent started dominating the marketplace, researchers at competing companies scrambled to figure out why. What they found was that customers said that if they forgot to use Pepsodent, they realized their mistake because they missed that cool, tingling sensation in their mouths. They expected — they craved — that slight irritation. If it wasn't there, their mouths didn't feel clean.

Claude Hopkins wasn't selling beautiful teeth, he was selling a sensation. Once people craved that cool tin-

gling — once they equated it with cleanliness — brushing became a habit.

"Consumers need some kind of signal that a product is working," Tracy Sinclair, who was a brand manager for Oral-B and Crest Kids Toothpaste, says. "We can make toothpaste taste like anything. The tingling doesn't make the toothpaste work any better. It just convinces people it's doing the job."

Anyone can use this basic formula to create habits of his or her own. Want to exercise more? Choose a cue, such as going to the gym as soon as you wake up, and a reward, such as a smoothie after each workout. Then think about that smoothie, or about the endorphin rush you'll feel. Allow yourself to anticipate the reward. Eventually that craving will make it easier to push through the gym doors every day.

Cravings drive habits. And figuring out how to spark a craving makes creating a new habit easier. ●

The Golden Rule of Habit Change: Why Transformation Occurs

Tony Dungy had waited an eternity for the job as head coach of the Buccaneers. For 17 years, he prowled the sidelines as an assistant coach, first at the University of Minnesota, then with the Pittsburgh Steelers, then the Kansas City Chiefs, and then back to Minnesota with the Vikings. Four times in the past decade, he had been invited to interview for head coaching positions with NFL teams.

All four times, the interviews hadn't gone well.

Part of the problem was Dungy's coaching philosophy. In his job interviews, he would patiently explain his belief that the key to winning was changing players' habits. He wanted to get players to stop making so many decisions during a game, he said. He wanted them to react automatically, habitually. If he could instill the right habits, his team would win. Period.

"Champions don't do extraordinary things," Dungy would explain. "They do ordinary things, but they do them without thinking, too fast for the other team to react. They follow the habits they've learned."

How, the owners would ask, are you going to create those new habits?

Oh, no, he wasn't going to create new habits. Dungy was going to change players' old ones. And the secret to changing old habits was using what was already inside players' heads. Habits are a three-step loop — the cue, the routine, and the reward — but Dungy only wanted to attack the middle step, the routine. He knew from

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experience that it was easier to convince someone to adopt a new behavior if there was something familiar at the beginning and end.

His coaching strategy embodied an axiom, a Golden Rule of habit change that study after study has shown is among the most powerful tools for creating change. Dungy recognized that you can never truly extinguish bad habits. Rather, to change a habit, you must keep the old cue and deliver the old reward, but insert a new routine.

That's the rule: If you use the same cue and provide the same reward, you can shift the routine and change the habit. Almost any behavior can be transformed if the cue and reward stay the same.

Four times Dungy explained his habit-based philosophy to team owners. Four times they listened politely, thanked him for his time and then hired someone else.

Then, in 1996, the woeful Buccaneers called. Dungy flew to Tampa Bay and, once again, laid out his plan for how they could win. The day after the final interview, they offered him the job.

Dungy's system would eventually turn the Bucs into one of the league's winningest teams. He would become the only coach in NFL history to reach the play-offs in 10 consecutive years, the first African American coach to win a Super Bowl, and one of the most respected figures in professional athletics. His coaching techniques would spread throughout the league and all of sports. His approach would help illuminate how to remake the habits in anyone's life.

There is, unfortunately, no specific set of steps guaranteed to work for every person. We know that a habit cannot be eradicated — it must, instead, be replaced. And we know that habits are most malleable when the Golden Rule of habit change is applied. If we keep the same cue and the same reward, a new routing can be inserted.

But that's not enough. For a habit to stay changed, people must believe change is possible. And, most often, that belief only emerges with the help of a group.

If you want to quit smoking, figure out a different routine that will satisfy the cravings filled by cigarettes. Then, find a support group, a collection of other former smokers, or a community that will help you believe you can stay away from nicotine, and use that group when you feel you might stumble.

If you want to lose weight, study your habits to determine why you really leave your desk for a snack each day and then find someone to take a walk with you, to gossip with at their desk rather than in the cafeteria, a

Habit Reversal Therapy

Today, habit reversal therapy is used to treat verbal and physical tics, depression, smoking, gambling problems, anxiety, bedwetting, procrastination, obsessive-compulsive disorders and other behavioral problems. And its techniques lay bare one of the fundamental principles of habits: Often, we don't really understand the cravings driving our behaviors until we look for them.

If you identify the cues and rewards, you can change the routine. At least, most of the time. For some habits, however, there's one other ingredient that's necessary: belief.

Understanding the cues and cravings driving your habits won't make them suddenly disappear — but it will give you a way to plan how to change the pattern.

group that tracks weight-loss goals together, or someone who also wants to keep a stock of apples, rather than chips, nearby.

The evidence is clear: If you want to change a habit, you must find an alternative routine, and your odds of success go up dramatically when you commit to changing as part of a group. Belief is essential, and it grows out of a communal experience, even if that community is only as large as two people. ●

PART 2: THE HABITS OF SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATIONS

Keystone Habits: Which Habits Matter Most

On a blustery October day in 1987, a herd of prominent Wall Street investors and stock analysts gathered in the ballroom of a posh Manhattan hotel. They were there to meet the new CEO of the Aluminum Company of America — or Alcoa, as it was known — a corporation that, for nearly a century, had manufactured everything from the foil that wraps Hershey's Kisses and the metal in Coca-Cola cans to the bolts that hold satellites together.

Alcoa's management had made misstep after misstep, unwisely trying to expand into new product lines while competitors stole customers and profits away. There had been a palpable sense of relief when Alcoa's board announced it was time for new leadership. That relief, though, turned to unease when the choice was announced: the new CEO would be a former govern-

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ment bureaucrat named Paul O’Neill. Many on Wall Street had never heard of him. When Alcoa scheduled this meet and greet at the Manhattan ballroom, every major investor asked for an invitation.

“If you want to understand how Alcoa is doing, you need to look at our workplace safety figures. If we bring our injury rates down, it won’t be because of cheerleading or the nonsense you sometimes hear from other CEOs,” O’Neill said. “It will be because the individuals at this company have agreed to become part of something important: They’ve devoted themselves to creating a habit of excellence. Safety will be an indicator that we’re making progress in changing our habits across the entire institution. That’s how we should be judged.”

The investors in the room almost stampeded out the doors when the presentation ended. One jogged to the lobby, found a pay phone, and called his 20 largest clients.

“I said, ‘The board put a crazy hippie in charge and he’s going to kill the company,’” the investor said. “I ordered them to sell their stock immediately, before everyone else in the room started calling their clients and telling them the same thing.

“It was literally the worst piece of advice I gave in my career.”

Within a year of O’Neill’s speech, Alcoa’s profits would hit a record high. By the time O’Neill retired in 2000, the company’s annual net income was five times larger than before he arrived, and its market capitalization had risen by \$27 billion. Someone who invested a million dollars in Alcoa on the day O’Neill was hired would have earned another million dollars in dividends while he headed the company, and the value of their stock would be five times bigger when he left.

So how did O’Neill make one of the largest, stodgiest, and most potentially dangerous companies into a profit machine and a bastion of safety?

By attacking one habit and then watching the changes ripple through the organization.

Keystone Habits

O’Neill believed that some habits have the power to start a chain reaction, changing other habits as they move through an organization. Some habits, in other words, matter more than others in remaking businesses and lives. These are “keystone habits,” and they can influence how people work, play, live, spend and communicate. Keystone habits start a process that, over time, transforms everything.

Keystone habits say that success doesn’t depend on getting every single thing right, but instead relies on

identifying a few key priorities and fashioning them into powerful levers. The habits that matter most are the ones that, when they start to shift, dislodge and remake other patterns.

Researchers have found institutional habits in almost every organization or company they’ve scrutinized. “Individuals have habits; groups have routines,” wrote the academic Geoffrey Hodgson, who spent a career examining organizational patterns.

To O’Neill, these kinds of habits seemed dangerous. “We were basically ceding the decision making to a process that occurred without actually thinking.”

At the time, Alcoa was struggling. Critics said the company’s workers weren’t nimble enough and the quality of its products was poor. But at the top of O’Neill’s list he didn’t write “quality” or “efficiency” as his biggest priorities. At a company as big and as old as Alcoa, you can’t flip a switch and expect everyone to work harder or produce more. The previous CEO had tried to mandate improvements, and 15,000 employees had gone on strike. It got so bad they would bring dummies to the parking lots, dress them like managers, and burn them in effigy. “Alcoa was not a happy family,” one person from that period said. “It was more like the Manson family, but with the addition of molten metal.”

O’Neill figured his top priority would have to be something that everybody — unions and executives — could agree was important. He needed a focus that would bring people together, that would give him leverage to change how people worked and communicated.

Choosing a Focus for Leverage

“I went to basics,” O’Neill said. “Everyone deserves to leave work as safely as they arrive, right? You shouldn’t be scared that feeding your family is going to kill you. That’s what I decided to focus on: changing everyone’s safety habits.”

At the top of O’Neill’s list he wrote down “SAFETY” and set an audacious goal: zero injuries. Not zero factory injuries. Zero injuries, period. That would be his commitment, no matter how much it cost.

The brilliance of this approach was that no one, of course, wanted to argue with O’Neill about worker safety. Unions had been fighting for better safety rules for years. Managers didn’t want to argue about it, either, since injuries meant lost productivity and low morale.

What most people didn’t realize, however, was that O’Neill’s plan for getting zero injuries entailed the most radical realignment in Alcoa’s history. To protect work

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ers, Alcoa needed to become the best, most streamlined aluminum company on earth.

O'Neill's safety plan, in effect, was modeled on the habit loop. He identified a simple cue: an employee injury. He instituted an automatic routine: Any time someone was injured, the unit president had to report it to O'Neill within 24 hours and present a plan for making sure the injury never happened again. And there was a reward: The only people who got promoted were those who embraced the system.

As Alcoa's safety patterns shifted, other aspects of the company started changing with startling speed, as well. Rules that unions had spent decades opposing — such as measuring the productivity of individual workers — were suddenly embraced, because such measurements helped everyone figure out when part of the manufacturing process was getting out of whack, posing a safety risk. Policies that managers had long resisted — such as giving workers autonomy to shut down a production line when the pace became overwhelming — were now welcomed, because that was the best way to stop injuries before they occurred.

O'Neill never promised that his focus on worker safety would increase Alcoa's profits. However, as his new routines moved through the organization, costs came down, quality went up, and productivity skyrocketed. If molten metal was injuring workers when it splashed, then the pouring system was redesigned, which led to fewer injuries. It also saved money because Alcoa lost less raw material in spills. If a machine kept breaking down, it was replaced, which meant there was less risk of a broken gear snagging an employee's arm. It also meant higher quality products because, as Alcoa discovered, equipment malfunctions were a chief cause of subpar aluminum.

Initial Shifts Start Chain Reactions

Researchers have found similar dynamics in dozens of other settings, including individual's lives.

Studies have documented that families who habitually eat dinner together seem to raise children with better homework skills, higher grades, greater emotional control and more confidence. Making your bed every morning is correlated with better productivity, a greater sense of well-being and stronger skills at sticking with a budget. It's not that a family meal or a tidy bed causes better grades or less frivolous spending. But somehow those initial shifts start chain reactions that help other good habits take hold.

If you focus on changing or cultivating keystone habits, you can cause widespread shifts. They help other habits flourish by creating new structure and they establish cultures where change becomes contagious. ●

PART 3: THE HABITS OF SOCIETIES

The Neurology of Free Will: Are We Responsible for Our Habits?

Habits are not as simple as they appear. Habits, even once they are rooted in our minds, aren't destiny. We can choose our habits, once we know how. Everything we know about habits, from neurologists studying amnesiacs and organizational experts remaking companies, is that any of them can be changed if you understand how they function.

Hundreds of habits influence our days — they guide how we get dressed in the morning, talk to our kids, and fall asleep at night; they impact what we eat for lunch, how we do business, and whether we exercise or have a beer after work. Each of them has a different cue and offers a unique reward. Some are simple and others are complex, drawing upon emotional triggers and offering subtle neurochemical prizes. But every habit, no matter its complexity, is malleable. The most dysfunctional companies can transform themselves.

However, to modify a habit, you must decide to change it. You must consciously accept the hard work of identifying the cues and rewards that drive the habits' routines and find alternatives. You must know you have control and be self-conscious enough to use it.

Once you understand that habits can change, you have the freedom — and the responsibility — to remake them. Once you understand that habits can be rebuilt, the power of habit becomes easier to grasp, and the only option left is to get to work.

If you believe you can change — if you make it a habit — the change becomes real. This is the real power of habit: the insight that your habits are what you choose them to be. Once that choice occurs and becomes automatic, it's not only real, it starts to seem inevitable. ●

RECOMMENDED READING LIST

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