

Habits: Good or Bad they drive current performance

On the plane ride home from my visit to Australia over the last two weeks, I was chatting with Phyliss from San Francisco who sat next to me. I mentioned how it was a challenge to adapt to driving on the opposite side of the road and she agreed. She said that she had a sore arm after a few days of driving there because she kept banging her arm against the door on her right as she automatically reached for the shifter normally located there. This made me think of how tied we are to our habits, both good and bad, and how difficult it is to change them. I thought it might be difficult to readjust to driving at home again but I was wrong. Each day I drove Down Under I needed to be extra alert so as to not pull onto the wrong side of the road, whereas as soon as I got back into my car here yesterday I didn't have to think twice about which side to drive on. I did, however, notice that I tried reaching for the flasher control on my right instead of left. This means that the process of habit modification was happening.

Our habits drive and control us, whether it is our thinking, our attitudes, behaviours, actions etc. While in Australia I attended a conference on personal development, and the speaker said that whatever you do consistently you will get good at. My experience confirms this to be true. The problem is that I could be thinking thoughts or doing things that are bad for me or hinder my progress towards what I really want to achieve in my life and my work. The question I must ask is: what present habits do I have that are counter productive for me? The next question becomes: how do I get rid of or change those habits to produce the desired results?

The same thing applies to your organization. According to Warren Bennis who has written several books on leadership, *"leaders are people who do the right things; managers are people who do things right. Both roles are crucial, but they differ profoundly. I often observe people in top positions doing the wrong things well"*.

It is what people do and how they do it that creates the current state of an organization, especially those in leadership and management positions. If one does not question both what and how we do things, we will continue to do them the same way.

So the first step in habit modification is to decide what needs to happen, or what are the desired results that the departments and people need to produce? Once this is clear you can look at what habits, beliefs, attitudes and ways of functioning drive current performance. Which ones are positive and constructive and which are destructive and negative?

Changing habits is not easy as my driving experience has proved, although the threat of an accident does create an immediate sense of urgency to change and perform. How much of a sense of urgency and commitment do you and your organization have to change and improve? How do you make the changes happen and stick? This is actually the topic of our next Executive Leadership breakfast discussion, so if this subject interests you consider registering for that.

Here are the steps to changing a habit or creating a new one. These same steps are related to learning a new task as well, and can be applied to developing a new way of thinking or attitude as well as to a physical action or behaviour. All new learning or change must go through this process.

1. Create clear understanding of what you need to do to change or learn and why you want to do it.
2. Practice over and over performing the new habit or behaviour. Modify and correct the new habit in order to perform it well.
3. Persist in doing the new habit even though it may feel strange or uncomfortable.
4. Have it become automatic and comfortable. This has been achieved when you do not have to think about doing whatever it is you want to change or learn anymore.

If this was applied to my example of driving it would look like this.

1. Understand how the shifting works, where the controls and indicators are located on the steering column and dash. This stage is called unconscious incompetence as you didn't know what you needed to know.
2. Practice using the controls and indicators, steering and driving the car. Repeat until you are able to perform. This stage is called conscious incompetence. You must think of what you are doing, and then you can perform it, but results may be inconsistent.
3. Practice and become consistent in your performance so that it becomes comfortable and a habit. This is called conscious competence because now you can perform the action or thought as desired but you still need to focus on doing it right.
4. Perform with ease without having to think about it. This stage is called unconscious competence because now it has become a habit and you no longer have to think about doing it a certain way; it is automatic. This is the ultimate goal of all learning and habit modification. If you think about it, everything you learned has gone through these four stages.

All this sounds rather easy and straightforward; however whoever has worked on changing a habit knows that easy it is not. The reason is that many habits are deeply ingrained in our thoughts, emotions and actions, and because they are unconscious we keep doing them without thought even though they may be dysfunctional and produce undesirable results. Anyone who has tried to change behaviours to lose weight can attest to this.

Do you need help with modifying a habit, creating a new one or changing a process that people are tied to and doesn't work? Coaching can help develop strategies to assist you in the process as well as drive greater accountability. Let us know if we can assist you in building more effective and healthier habits and behaviours.

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