
HOW DO LEADERS MAKE CHANGE STICK?

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To lead is to experience frustration with change. So many change initiatives, whether individual, organizational or social, burn energy and fizzle out without ever making very much difference.

What a paradox! The most adaptive, inventive and cooperative species on the planet struggles with change. At a time when business and consumers are reveling in our eye-watering technological wizardry, individuals such as myself still struggle just to stick to a diet or an exercise regime. Collectively, we humans currently are burning down our own house, our political systems are faltering and our societies are splintering in ugly ways.

It seems to me that we humans are good adaptors, but we are not perfect, and we are good resistors too. I have often joked on my leadership courses that it may be necessary for a small island in the Pacific to sink into the ocean before we take climate change seriously. I even have suggested very unkindly to my Kiwi participants that it might need to be New Zealand. But the joke is on me! It turns out the island in question is Australia, and our problems are heat and fire even before rising sea levels.

In an article several years ago, I quoted academics Ian Goldrin and Chris Kutarna from Oxford University who described the past several decades as a “New Renaissance” of phenomenal economic and social development, and a time for optimism despite the dangers and downside risks which we faced. Davos Man and booster-in-chief, Donald Trump, still pumped for such optimism at a recent gathering of the global business community. Personally, I am now more inclined to agree with the Nobel Prize winning economist Paul Krugman who eschews too many grounds for legitimate optimism about the immediate future, and wrote recently in the New York Times: “let’s be honest, things are grim, but we still need to engage in positive action”.

So, let’s be positive and explore some principles and methods that leaders can use to make individual, organizational and social change stick. Wendy Wood, a Professor of Psychology and Business at the University of Southern California, has spent half a life time researching the role of habit in sustaining and changing human practices and she is considered by many of her peers to be the foremost expert in this field. I will provide some of my own qualifying views on the role of habit when leading change later in this article. Wood’s latest book is titled “Good Habits Bad Habits”, and she has some fascinating insights into why some change initiatives fail and others succeed.

Wood has some interesting advice for how you can stop looking at your phone so often, and she reveals that individuals who use *Cues* such as exercising at the same time each day are significantly more successful than others at sticking with a new fitness regime. A regular running mate is another success factor because people generally are a strong

cue. *Context* is important for supporting a habit – huddled like an outcast outside a building in the wind, is not as conducive to smoking as a nice warm restaurant with a glass of wine. *Rewards* play a supportive role too. That sugar hit keeps you coming back for the muffin, and that small emotional charge of expectation gets you out of your office chair in the first place. I have previously quoted a research project which demonstrated that medical staff wash their hands far more often when an electronic board was installed to flash an accumulative score for individuals and teams after each wash. Wood describes a habit principle called “stacking”, where you piggyback a new practice onto an existing stable habit context, such as changing smoke alarms when clocks change. She used stacking in research for Proctor and Gamble to produce a 15% better take-up of an already popular new clothes’ freshener product. Like many parents of young children, I used to trick my now vegetarian daughter into eating her greens by hiding them in the spaghetti sauce. New research on this issue highlights the central role of persistence and *Repetition* in habit formation, because it recommends to parents that the most reliable method for vegetable uptake is: just keep trying.

During the 1970’s the medical evidence became clear about the link between diet, and especially the prevalence of fruit and vegetables, and the prevention of heart disease and cancer. The National Cancer Institute in the USA partnered with the agriculture industry in California in a major change initiative called “5 A Day for Better Health”. The educational and awareness campaign was hugely successful with school children humming the jingles, and it later spread to the whole globe via

the World Health Organisation where it gained another two servings. A 1991 survey found that only 8% of Americans were aware that they should be eating at least five servings of fresh produce each day, and by 1997 this had changed significantly to 39% of Americans. However, research also established that the same small proportion of Americans were eating sufficient fruit and vegetables at the end of the decade-long campaign as at the start. Change in behaviour was non-existent. Awareness alone did not equal change. This lesson is reinforced by more recent research which suggests that the admirable labelling of calorie content on menus in restaurants and fast-food outlets, often leads to an increase in the average consumption of calories by their customers! Perhaps the information simply reinforces an existing habit which links calories with enjoyment.

After the Second World War, tobacco companies would compete for customers by using advertisements featuring smoking doctors extolling the numerous virtues of their cigarettes. In 1964 a famous US Surgeon General's report finally linked tobacco to the number one source of preventable deaths. Warning labels were now added to cigarette packs and within five years, 70% of Americans reported that smoking was bad for your health. Yet, 40% of Americans were still smoking a decade after the famous Surgeon General's report – exactly the same number of smokers at the time of its' release. Smoking was going the way of the fruit and veg campaign. But today only 15% of Americans smoke. What changed it? Governments stopped relying on awareness and individual willpower alone. A whole suite of initiatives was taken to counter the habit of smoking by changing social cues, contexts and rewards or

penalties. Public advertising of smoking was banned. Smoking itself was banned progressively from restaurants, sporting events, offices and the like, relegating smokers to inhospitable outposts as the context for their smoking. Taxes on cigarettes were increased massively. Public health programs to assist smokers to quit were well funded. A major cue for purchase was removed when cigarettes were no longer allowed to be visible and on display at point of sale. The effectiveness of these habit-busting measures can be assessed by comparing the higher smoking rates which prevail still in those States which have not been so vigorous in taking these actions. In a similar way, the State of Victoria in Australia has reduced annual road fatalities, especially from drink-driving, by 75% by introducing a raft of public measures which includes education but also alters context, cues, rewards and penalties in regard to driving.

Context can be used to assist in changing or forming an entrenched habit. A majority of American soldiers used drugs during the Vietnam war, and a good proportion of them returned home as heavy users of marijuana and a smaller number were addicted to heroin. They were home safe but were their lives ruined? One famous study followed about 500 soldiers who tested positive in their urine for opioids on their return. Something truly unpredictable occurred for such a strong addictive habit – within a year of disembarking only 5% continued with their habit. What was the amazing rehabilitation program? For them, it was called America. The context of the violence of the Vietnam war and easy access to drugs encouraged a drug habit for these soldiers, and the

context of peacetime America, families and jobs no longer supported the habit.

On my leadership programs I get a large group of senior managers to sit in a circle without tables – I do it because it facilitates dialogue, but also because it changes their context from the business-as-usual office, or the school desk. It is often the most controversial aspect of a program, but it works well. Many management teams persist with the practice for the leadership meetings back in their companies, because after a week of practice it has now become a context for having real leadership conversations, and because it is now a cue to ensure they keep having them.

Advertising is interesting in the role that it plays in change and habit formation, especially in the commercial world. Although it is generally accepted that persuasive advertising is one or two steps behind changes which are already underway in society and in the culture, advertising can certainly reinforce and amplify incipient trends and nudge them to become established habits. Russell Howcroft has a terrific documentary available through the Australian Broadcasting Corporation titled “How Australia Got its’ Mojo”, which chronicles how the Mojo team of creative advertisers produced a series of winning advertisements which tapped into Australians’ growing level of confidence in themselves and their culture. Their clever, emotional ads convinced patriotic fans to stop boycotting Kerry Packer’s World Series Cricket, influenced large numbers of American tourists to switch from Europe and visit friendly Australia, encouraged the locals to be proud of the national carrier Qantas and use it to explore the world while still

calling Australia home, and even congratulated traditionalists for switching from butter to Meadow Lea margarine. Oh, and they sold more cigarettes as well.

Wendy Wood argues that at least 40% of all human activity is habitual. It doesn't require much or any thinking and decision-making – it uses a different part of the brain. It is automatic, very efficient, uses much less energy and we are so unaware of it on a regular basis that we could almost call it a second self. These habits are formed by repetition, and they respond to context, cues and rewards or penalties. Wood's book provides lots of detailed advice about how to employ these elements for change. Some habits are really helpful, such as sudden breaking in a car to avoid a collision. Other habits may be less welcome or even dangerous, such as eating large quantities of invisible salt and sugar added to food. Apart from a small proportion of exceptional humans, good intentions and willpower are almost never enough to change a habit or to stick with a new one. As I have argued in my previous article "Changing Habits: Why Nuns Are Faster Than Us", persistence is rarely enough to persist at a new habit. Wood argues that individuals and organizations should learn how to purposefully harness the power of habit. By doing this we will be more successful at sustaining change, and we will free our executive and decision-making part of the brain, which consumes more energy, to deal with really important, creative or relational matters.

To be honest, I find this argument to be a little too cute. I am not a whole-hearted fan of deliberately handing over even more of our activities to an unthinking, non-reflective, mindless part of ourselves or

our organisations. I do think habit can be a very useful ally in helping us to sustain change, but this proposal can underplay the truly dark side of individual and institutional habits and underestimate the importance of insight, reflection and mindfulness in ensuring that habits are truly helpful and do not suck the life out of life. Let's start with my last point. Wendy Wood herself acknowledges that there can be a problem of boredom with habits. Just ask couples in long term relationships. Even useful habits can deaden things and turn them into chores. Wood notes that for many of us breakfast is generally the most habitual, efficient and even healthy meal of the day. But I worry about what gets lost in the total habituation? I efficiently dispose of my healthy serve of fruit while tending to the toaster at breakfast time, but I am shocked at how rarely I actually taste my delicious banana or even remember having eaten it. Breakfast done. Tick.

Not needing to think too much about actions can be helpful and efficient, but not even being *aware* can be dangerous. Some of the practices uncovered at the Australian Royal Commission into Banking involved intentional fraud, while many of them were habitual ways of operating which were definitely exploitative or unethical but never given much thought and largely invisible to participants, because they were just the way things get done around here.

Machines and computers are very good at repetition and habitual practices. Since the industrial revolution, business and organizations have been busy automating vast processes, freeing humans for more creative and less laborious tasks, and delivering huge benefits as a result. Algorithms and Artificial Intelligence are now promising a

spectacular revolution in this process and they are already delivering some wonderful outcomes. Isn't this just an example of letting the computers do the habitual part and we humans get on with the more sophisticated and fun activities? No, say some very impressive opponents who urge caution. Critics are arguing it is not the same benign disruption as past automation, because AI has the potential not just to habituate mundane tasks but to replace and superannuate human beings all together, by being smarter, faster, more reliable and better learners than humans at pretty much everything. Even now, early developments such as Facebook or widespread Face Recognition technology, are starting to mess with us. And current social and environmental turmoil raises a red flag about the famed governance ability of humans to manage Artificial Intelligence.

Staying with humans though, Wood argues that habits are like a second self, a habit self that operates under the radar, independent of our thinking and at times even volition. We might choose to behave in certain ways and not other ways, but our habit self just ignores the instructions and continues behaving in its own merry way. The question is: just how much do we want to entrust to mere habit? One of the great challenges which I encounter in my own work with leaders is that they already have habitual ways of viewing and relating to themselves, an Identity if you like, which can be helpful in exercising leadership but also often is limiting to the growth of leadership. The limitations usually become obvious in stretch or stress situations where habitual ways of feeling, thinking and re-acting are on display and are insufficient for the challenge. With public leaders it is openly discussed and is seen as their

Achilles Heel. Coaching and advising leaders to act with freedom and power in these situations is tricky because we have a life-time of repetition and familiarity with our self-image or identity, and we are in the habit of believing it is actually who we are. For this reason, the practice of self-awareness is critical in the exercise of leadership.

I often get invited to make presentations at executive retreats and senior management gatherings. Regularly, I will be preceded by a motivational speaker who often is a celebrity, or a great sports person, or a former top business leader. Mercifully, some of them are entertaining, but I am certain that for the most part their motivational contributions and witty anecdotes will have no lasting value for the participants and will be forgotten at the first flat tyre. I am confident that my own sessions actually do have some lasting substantive value, and people still generally find them very interesting, even entertaining. Annoyingly, the celebrities are paid massively more than me! (Some academics who are more learned than I am, have hit commercial paydirt according to Anais Giridharadas in his recent book “Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World”, by turning themselves into attractive Thought Leaders who largely ignore anything substantive or provocative from their own body of work). I make this point not to pitch for an increase in my remuneration rates, but to argue that I have spent a long time working with senior leaders and managers figuring out how they actually do learn and change. I include learning and change together here, because in my view and style of management education if there is no change then no learning has occurred, and if no learning occurs then change is unlikely to follow.

My approach to learning and change for practicing managers has obviously been influenced by the Action Theory of Learning, but I have added my own flavours. I have simplified my process to six steps. I started with four steps a decade ago, but as I noticed senior leaders and managers struggling to persist with beneficial changes which they had initiated, I added two more steps with the fifth being Habit Formation. I am calling them Steps for the purpose of clarity, but obviously I am describing an organic process which is neither linear nor mechanistic. So, Step 1 is Acquire New or Fresh Knowledge and Experiences; Step 2 is Reflection and Mindfulness, which leads to; Step 3 Personal Insight, which only makes a difference with; Step 4 Action, Experimentation and Application, which is only sustained with; Step 5 Habit Formation, which only stays healthy and constructive with; Step 6 More Reflection and Mindfulness.

This learning and change process for leaders demonstrates my respect for the role of habit in making change stick, but it situates it in a broader range of practices which keeps things fresh, creative and constructive.