

Time for A New Thing?

New year, new you? or same old patterns....

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"Anyone can change any habit..."

For many people, the New Year provides the nudge (or sometimes the alarm bell) to consider some kind of change. Lose weight. Get fit. Change job. Returning to work after a relaxing festive break can bring the two into starker contrast (ie our work and non-work lives). Frustrations, challenges, problems, problem people, or just people, that existed before Christmas are still there in early January. It's just that the power they can hold over our enjoyment of work subsides during their absence just enough for us to forget their capacity to derail a good day's work.

They just dont get it (or is it me?)

Many of us under-estimate the contribution we make ourselves to the difficulties we face at work. Whilst we might find it easier to accept that we have contributed to our own lack of fitness, we don't always see how our own habits shape what we experience at work. We are fully aware of "their part" without always being aware of "our part". We stand incredulous at another person's inability to "get it" (they just don't...) and are amazed at what they say and do, or indeed, what they fail to say or do. But how are we contributing to this unwanted behaviour pattern by those of our own? Most of us are probably worse at communicating (and managing) than we like to think. We are surprised that others don't get our meaning, and don't perform well, without always realising that there are things we might need to change in order to get the outcomes we seek.

So, if you find yourself wanting to change your boss, your colleague, your project, your team, or even your organisation (as well as your weight and your fitness level), you may first want to think about changes you can make to yourself. They call this "personal development" and yet the desire to learn, grow, and change is not quite as prevalent as we might think. Personal developments plans are notoriously left empty or (possibly worse) populated by generic training courses - and the more senior we get, the less likely we are to follow the corporate pro-formas. So the New Year is a good time to change some contributory habits, patterns, behaviours. Yet, as anyone who has tried to break a habit knows, they are formed over time and can get established, even anchored with remarkable resilience.

Neale Donald Walsch puts it like this:

Yearning for a new way will not produce it. Only ending the old way can do that. You cannot hold onto the old, all the while declaring that you want something new. The old will defy the new; The old will deny the new; The old will decry the new. There is only one way to bring in the new. You must make room for it.

Don't think of it as a New Year resolution, says Charles Duhigg, the author of *The Power of Habit* – think of it as a new year plan. “Much more important than setting a far off goal, like running a marathon, is to set an immediate plan that you can start right away.” Start with baby steps – running half a mile every Monday morning, for example – and you can work upwards. Or change the way you manage the monthly meeting or the way you go about searching for new roles, internally and externally.

“Anyone can change any habit”, says Duhigg; “it doesn't matter how old you are or how deeply ingrained that behaviour is”. But that doesn't mean – as everyone knows – that New Year resolutions are consistently successful. You can read the full article here: [by Moya Sarnier](#). When our New Year resolutions fail (or perhaps when our attempts to become a better manager fail miserably), we berate ourselves for our weak self-discipline; we tell ourselves our willpower wasn't strong enough, as though we are a marathon runner who couldn't make it to the finish line. The image of a self-control muscle that gets tired over time, first proposed by the social psychologist Roy Baumeister in the late 90s, has shaped our collective consciousness. But a new generation of psychologists, unable to replicate the studies that proved his theory of “ego depletion”, are questioning this model. They are exploring other factors that might determine whether individuals can stick to their goals, including their motivation and environment. Motivation (for change) is something that fluctuates, explains Katharina Bernecker, a postdoctoral researcher at Leibniz-Institut in Tübingen, south-west Germany.

Willpower, it seems, is not the answer to realising the changes we seek. Although studies show that people who have a lot of self-control tend to be good at meeting their goals – if they are motivated to do well at work, they get promoted; if they want to live a healthy lifestyle, they exercise more – it isn't because they use their willpower to control their behaviour, suggests Wendy Wood, provost professor of psychology and business at the University of Southern California. In fact, it is because they find a way around it. These individuals score highly on scales that measure their ability to control their actions and resist temptation, but “the interesting thing is that it doesn't work that way”, Wood says. “What we've learned is that people with high self-control are not going through these white-knuckle struggles to eat better, exercise more or work harder. Instead, what they do is form habits. They automate their behaviours that get them to their goals, so they perform them without even thinking about it. That's what makes them so successful.” It isn't about willpower; it is about habits. And we might add that great leadership, or great performance at work, is also very much about habits.

So, what makes a habit? First, says Bas Verplanken, professor of psychology at the University of Bath, they are automatic, occurring as part of our daily flow. “If going to the gym is a conscious decision, we're vulnerable, because we have a fantastic capacity to rationalise why we should not go – we're very, very good at that. Habits protect you against thinking,” he says. Second, they are triggered by cues in the environment, such as time or place. Third, every habit has a reward: when our brain starts to anticipate and crave the reward, it makes the behaviour automatic. It was neuroscientists who brought habits on to psychology's radar, since brain scans cast light on which parts are activated as a behaviour becomes habitual. “As we repeat actions, we engage different aspects of our neural system and you can actually see habit formation taking place in the brain,” says Wood. “When you have people in scanners, activation starts in the decision-making areas of the brain – the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus. Over time, as you repeat a behaviour and keep

getting that reward, activation shifts more to the basal ganglia areas, particularly the putamen, because we're no longer thinking actively; instead, we're responding based on habit." Wood's research shows that 43% of what we do every day is performed out of habit. "It's a shortcut – if you do what you did before, in this context, you'll get the reward that you got before," she says.

These insights have significant implications for our New Year plans for changing things up at work. As Duhigg explains, "Every habit has three components: the cue, the routine itself and the reward. A huge part of understanding how to change or control your habits is diagnosing the cues and, most importantly, the reward that routine delivers to you,". Rather than thinking in terms of breaking a bad habit, Duhigg argues we need to change the habit by finding a new routine that corresponds to the old cue, one that will deliver whatever reward I am getting from it currently.

Simply resolving to behave differently won't help, says David Bell, which could equally explain failed New Year resolutions and failed Culture Change programmes. But what can help is trying to figure out why we are the way we are. "Sometimes people are very fearful of others for reasons they don't understand," he says. "That tendency in their character is not going to be dealt with by deciding not to be frightened of other people – they need to understand the roots of that and that takes more time."

And so we need to understand the roots behind the changes we seek at work as well as at home. Which means becoming a lot more aware of our motivations, our behaviours, and our impact on others. Sounds like a lot to take on, but I guess it really depends on how much we want to change.