

Coaching and Learning – Overcoming the Rule of Habits

Brain researchers have discovered that when we consciously develop new habits, we create parallel synaptic paths, and even entirely new brain cells, that can jump our trains of thought onto new, innovative tracks. We are born with the capacity to approach challenges in four primary ways: analytically, procedurally, relationally (or collaboratively) and innovatively. In the development process, the brain turns off those early modes of thought that seems most valuable for the first decade or so of life (e.g. creativity, play).

Rather than dismissing ourselves as unchangeable creatures of habit, we can instead direct our own change by consciously developing new habits. In fact, the more new things we try — the more we step outside our comfort zone — the more inherently creative we become, both in the workplace and in our personal lives.

Honoring Strengths and Habits

By recognizing what things we typically do on “auto-pilot”, those habits that are well established in our hippocampus, which form our usual way of doing things, its best to honor them, given when they were established in our early development, and are really hard to change. Emphasis in early development highlights analysis and procedure, meaning that few of us inherently use our innovative and collaborative modes of thought. Therefore, knowing what you are good at and doing even more of it creates excellence. And, we can’t really be good at everything.

Using Coaching support to deal with innate barriers and opportunities for new levels of effectiveness

This is where developing new habits can help. If you are an analytical or procedural thinker, you learn differently than someone who is inherently more collaborative or innovative. When you are motivated to learn something new, or develop a new habit, a new way of thinking of things, learning is accelerated vs. attempting to create totally new pathways in the brain.

Using the coaching initiative as an apprenticeship for a path forward to learning and trying new things we can consciously develop new habits and direct our own change; and, instead of trying to stop the old habits, the new habits we deliberately ingrain into ourselves create parallel synaptic pathways that can bypass the old ways of doing things.

Consider, what’s needed to be more innovative, is a fascination with wonder. However, we are taught to decide, and to decide, we also kill off all other possibilities but one. A good innovative thinker is always exploring the many other possibilities.

Comfort, Stretching, and Stress

Consider these three zones. At two extremes, comfort is the realm of existing habit, and stress occurs when a challenge is so far beyond current experience as to be challenging our ordinary capacity to cope. It’s that stretch zone in the middle — activities that feel a bit awkward and unfamiliar — where true change occurs. Research also tells us, unless we continue to learn new things, which challenge our brains to create new pathways,

they literally begin to atrophy. This may result in diseases we associate with as dementia; and other brain diseases.

Continuously stretching, getting ourselves out of the routine makes us more aware in general. The Japanese technique called kaizen, calls for tiny, continuous improvements. And when we initiate even positive change, we activate the fear part of our emotional brain, and if the fear is big enough, the fight-or-flight response in our brain will go off. It is the small steps in kaizen that don't set off fight or flight, but rather keep us in the thinking brain, where we still have access to our creativity and innovation.

The Importance of a Diverse Pool of Talent in Organizations

We often find in organizations, managers who are also by definition, leaders, tend to select, hire people that are more like themselves. We might also tend to believe that those who think the way we do are smarter than those who don't. That can be fatal in business, particularly for executives who surround themselves with like-thinkers. If seniority and promotion are based on similarity to those at the top, chances are strong that the company lacks intellectual diversity.

Forming New Learning/Habits

For men to try shaving from the other side of their face they typically start shaving, or putting your watch on the other wrist you typically wear it – notice the awkwardness, and the valuable moment known as *confusion*. It's after the confusion that the brain begins organizing the new input, ultimately creating new synaptic connections if the process is repeated enough. Doing it just once results in just confusion.

Going further, we may well notice in our efforts to create a new learning/habit, the Decider function steps in to protest our taking an unfamiliar path, resulting in convergence, and we keep doing the same things we were used to doing, over and over again, reinforcing the old habit.

Therefore, unless you are willing to move through the unknown and go from curiosity to wonder – you cannot have innovation. Work with your coach to reinforce changes you are targeting to get beyond old habits that limit our learning and development and unleash innovation and creativity.