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RESEARCH OF NOTE: BOOK REVIEW The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business, by Charles Duhigg

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RESEARCH OF NOTE: BOOK REVIEW

The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business, by Charles Duhigg, Random House Trade Paperbacks, New York, 2014, 371 pp., \$16 (paperback), ISBN-13: 978-0812981605

In his book *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, Charles Duhigg looks at getting results from the perspective of habits. The research that supports this book is drawn from the seminal work of theorists, more recent scholarly studies and business reporting, and hundreds of in-person interviews. The book lays out some well-documented processes for identifying daily patterns in order to tweak the sequencing and to establish new habits that can improve our personal, organizational and communal lives.

Duhigg is a journalist who has won multiple awards for his reporting, including a Pulitzer Prize for his work on the *New York Times*' series of articles about Apple, Inc. *The Power of the Habit* is Duhigg's first book; when released in 2012, it made the annual best business book lists for the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*. The book remained on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for over 60 weeks. Following its 2014 reissue with new material, it remains number 14 on Amazon.com's bestseller list of books on business and money and number 5 on the *New York Times* business bestsellers.

Discoveries over the past decade in the field of neuroscience have shed light on how the brain functions during routine, everyday tasks. One of those routines is the one we use to form habits through creating pathways in the brain. *The Power of Habit* explores these studies, as well as the emerging field of habit formation research in business, education, and public health, to provide the reader with real-world evidence along with concrete steps to help identify, evaluate, and change habits in order to improve individual, organizational, and community outcomes ranging from improving personal habits, to deepening employee engagement, and increasing voter turnout.

Duhigg moves beyond the use of willpower to break bad habits, to focus on establishing new habits to replace the old. Duhigg notes that his interest in habits comes from a fascination with the U.S. Army; his book provides examples from a range of sources in business and sports to show the continual importance of patterns, routines, and habits. Duhigg points out that being able to identify fundamental, keystone patterns is the essential first step in any transformation of individuals and companies. To change behavior, current

patterns must be understood. Once behavior is changed, with repetition of a new pattern after a week, those patterns can become automatic behaviors. Duhigg cites a 2006 research study from Duke University conducted by Bas Verplanken and Wendy Wood (2006) that found that up to 40% of our daily actions are based not on conscious decisions, but on established patterns and habits (Duhigg, 2014, notes).

Duhigg states that to break a habit, you need to diagnose the three parts of the habit: the cue, the reward, and the routine. In terms of the cue, when you feel the urge for your "bad" habit, analyze the situation. Ask yourself about the time, location, present company, current events, and personal feelings. In terms of the reward, determine the craving the "bad" habit serves to satisfy and then test your theory by substituting the "bad" with something more positive. For example, does the craving for a sweet pastry ease by substituting coffee for a doughnut? The purpose of this exercise is to find a "good" substitute that satisfies the craving. Once you have a working theory, the challenge is to repeat the new routine to satisfy the cue in order to establish a new habit. To reinforce the new habit, write down the sequence of the cue, the routine, and the reward. A key here is to recognize that you can never truly kill a habit, but you can change it. "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" (Duhigg, 2014, p. 66). A clear illustration of this can be seen through the popularity of nicotine patches and nicotine gum as cigarette substitutes that have been proven to help with smoking cessation.

To form a new "good" habit, the pattern is similar to the "cue" one. The first step is to recognize that you need a cue to start the process. Acknowledge the setting and take note of the time, location, present company, current events, and personal feelings. Only one cue is needed, but any of these can serve as the cue for your new habit. Choose your reward, write down the sequence, and post it somewhere visible. The key is testing the sequence to determine the reward is ade-

quate reinforcement for the new habit. If the reward is not adequate, substitute a new reward. Over the long run, the more powerful the intrinsic reward associated with the routine, the more powerful is the new habit and the more likely that it will stick.

While all of this may sound fairly straightforward and simplistic, Duhigg uses examples from organizations and communities to show how the power of habits can be used to reshape behaviors in order to realize goals set forth by leadership. Using examples from the Tampa Bay Buccaneers football team and their winning training techniques, to Alcoholics Anonymous and its meeting and sponsorship structures, to Alcoa's culture of safety and a commitment to excellence, the book shows how patterns and habits can be changed to realize goals. Alcoa is a particularly interesting case. Duhigg shows that through changing the organization's core habits surrounding safety, the company was able to band together in order to help transform Alcoa.

In all of Duhigg's cases, the essential added ingredient is the self-assurance that the new habit sequence will work: belief that the "good" habit will not be subsumed by the "bad" habit. "For habits to permanently change, people must believe that change is feasible ... Belief is easier when it occurs within a community" (Duhigg, 2014, p. 94). That belief can act as a powerful identifier for a team and can lead a group to bond and work together to achieve success at the corporate or community level.

Ultimately believing in a successful outcome is often a result of small wins. Duhigg draws upon Karl Weick's early research on organizational change to support the belief that winning is contagious and that small wins help feed into the overall pattern of establishing successful "good" habits. Sticking to good habits is linked to strengthening willpower and allowing participants to continue experiencing small successes. This fuels the pattern of habits and builds upon willpower, leading to additional successful routines and habits. Citing the origins of Case Western University's studies on willpower, self-regulation, and children eating marshmallows, Duhigg shows how success can snowball. Self-control can become its own successful routine, allowing individuals, organizations, and communities to develop additional "good" habits.

For successful "good" habits to flourish there needs to be some backup contingency planning. Duhigg explores Starbucks' training materials for dealing with angry customers, giving and receiving criticism, and even how to take orders in the face of distractions. Starbucks stresses training and repetition of these "good" habits in stressful situations so that employee training can kick in when needed without a lot of

discussion or thought. "Willpower becomes a habit by choosing a certain behavior ahead of time, and then following that routine when an inflection point arrives" (Duhigg, 2014, p. 155). This process of making new routines leads to making those routines automatic. Having the common training and reaction allows a homogeneity of culture and allows the consistency of the "good" habit to become the Starbuck standard.

"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 also 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" (Duhigg, 2014, p. 20). Duhigg argues that habits are chunked together in terms of routines or patterns that are started by a cue—think of it as a trigger that puts us into auto pilot until we realize the outcome or receive the reward. Patterns, cues, and rewards are the three parts of the habit puzzle.

In analyzing the appeal of McDonald's food, Duhigg maintains that the uniformity of the buildings, employee training, and menu serve as a cue for a routine of satisfying the craving to eat the french fries and hamburgers. Cravings drive habits, "where a craving is a neurological need based on the anticipation of the habit loop" (Duhigg, 2014, p. 51). This is why scents work so well as a unique trigger to a craving; think freshly brewed coffee or freshly baked cinnamon buns. Sounds are great triggers as well; remember that the next time your smartphone chimes about a new message.

Without a desire or craving for the reward, there is no habit to develop and sometimes desire has to be created. Procter & Gamble used its understanding of habits to turn Febreze into the successful product (approximately \$1 billion a year) it is today; the researchers positioned spraying Febreze as the reward for cleaning. The scent of Febreze was positioned and advertised so that consumers associated spraying Febreze with a clean, fresh-smelling room.

For class use, Charles Duhigg's website (charlesduhigg.com) offers a wide range of resources, including teaching aids, study guides, blog entries, videos, flowcharts, and an opportunity to subscribe to Duhigg's newsletter. The material is designed to help the reader better understand the processes described in the book. The myriad of resources demonstrates the popularity of the book and Duhigg's commitment to his audience, along with the opportunity to appeal to the visual learners in our classes. Overall, *The Power of Habit* is

entertaining and does a good job of relaying some complex and worthwhile material in a comprehensible manner. Duhigg's website offers a wealth of supporting material that will appeal to even the most social-media-savvy student. The ideas presented here may help analyze existing individual, organizational, and community patterns in order to realize some new outcomes in the process. The bottom line is that this book has some great implications for the start of a new semester and for establishing successful habits for instructors as well as students.

Reference

Verplanken, B., and Wood, W. (2006) Interventions to break and create consumer habits. *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing*, 25(1): 90–103.

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