

Making Personal Change Happen

'Life isn't about finding yourself. Life is about creating yourself.'
George Bernard Shaw

There are a number of key concepts which form the basis of the work we do here at Change & Transformation and one of the most fundamental is an understanding of how we, as humans, form habits and behaviours. It's why we often recommend to clients that we deliver work over a period of time (rather than in a one-off chunk), and why we always look to link the desired outcomes of a project to a broader 'purpose'. We've therefore developed this 'white paper' as a way of sharing our thinking on this issue.

Change is a fact of life

The world of work has changed dramatically over the last thirty years – from paper based offices where we all typed memos to each other and put them in the internal mail, to online collaboration, multifunctional teams and the introduction of unlimited holidays at companies such as Netflix or Visualsoft. Much of this change has been gradual as society, technology and the workplace adapt and evolve, but at every stage we have all had to develop new habits and behaviours to deal with and keep up with this change.

We would argue that there isn't an individual who isn't dealing to some degree with some form of personal development and new habit formation. However few of us are doing that mindfully or with support, and not only does that create high levels of avoidable stress in our lives, it also sets us up for failure. In fact the Health & Safety Executive estimate that 12.5 million days of work were lost to work-related stress, anxiety and depression across 2016 - although clearly not all of those will be related to dealing with and managing change, we know it is a factor for many.

This white paper presents some of the fundamentals which are essential to the creation of long-term personal change or development – so making a meaningful difference to our ability to operate effectively and comfortably at work. Of course, these fundamentals apply equally to changes in your personal life – so dig them out next time you set yourself a new personal goal.

What makes change so hard?

Some of the answers can be found in the studies of neuropsychology and neurobiology – the understanding of our brains and how they work. One of the seminal works in this area is by Daniel Kahneman in his book *Thinking Fast and Slow* (Kahneman, 2011). We were first introduced to this thinking by a market research agency in London who were using Kahneman to better understand (and therefore influence) the way that consumers make decisions about their shopping – if you think about it, once you understand how patterns of behaviours are formed, you are much better placed to influence them.

Kahneman identifies two ‘systems’ or ways that the brain processes information. The first of these is the one we use for most of the day; it is fast, requires little effort and is intuitive and instinctive. This is System One which helps us to navigate through the masses of information and stimulation which we come across every day. By basing its responses on pre-created patterns and linkages we avoid becoming overwhelmed. This is the system which allows you to touch-type at your computer without thinking of where the keys are, which makes your legs and arms move almost automatically when you walk up the road and means that sometimes, when you’re driving a route you drive a lot, you can barely remember the journey when you arrive. Our brains love to use this system to make decisions as it burns very little energy and have a preference for developing habitual behaviours or responses which are deeply ingrained and almost automatic. However, this easy and instinctive way of doing things can create challenges to adapting and making changes in the way we behave : if you are a regular driver, think about how hard it is when you start to drive a new car with controls which are just slightly different!

That leads us to the second system. System Two requires much more effort. It is the one you would engage if you were asked to solve a tricky maths problem, perform a tongue twister or operate a piece of machinery with which you are not familiar. It is ‘slow thinking’ which comes into play for activities that are difficult or unfamiliar where our brains don’t have an established pattern or approach to deal with them. Accessing System Two thinking is ideal when you want to be more present and engage your conscious thinking or problem solve in a considered or deliberate way but the thing about System Two is that it uses up so much energy that it cannot be sustained for very long. At the end of the day where you have been really out of your ‘comfort zone’ – you’ve been operating in situations where your brain cannot just access System One and flow, you are likely to be exhausted. In fact Kahneman’s research has shown that during System Two thinking the body actually consumes significantly more glucose! In a nutshell, your brain would much prefer to spend its time in System One, reacting automatically which means you are biologically programmed to stick with your usual way of doing things.

Readying the brain for change

Knowing that our brains much prefer to stick with ‘business as usual’ is an important step in understanding how to make change and why it can be so challenging. In fact, the only way to develop new habits in System One is to actively engage our System Two thinking and find ways to help our pre-programmed responses to change and

adapt. And of course, this means a concerted effort is required. The key is to set up enough support to encourage our brain to follow this new way enough times – through practice, feedback, measurement and support and challenge - gradually even the most difficult new things will become familiar and easy. The neural connections required to analyse, concentrate, reason and solve problems will strengthen and your brain will gradually get these new behaviours embedded in System One, making them easier and faster and leaving you free to learn something else.

Making change stick

Because the reflexive brain is so entrenched and effortless in its established thought patterns, we must work very hard to create a new ones. We need to use every trick in the book to pull the brain in the right direction. There are plenty of great thinkers working and writing in this field (many of whom are listed in the sources and further reading section of this paper). Drawing on all of those and adding our own years of experience we would suggest some simple strategies which must be in place to give the best chance of success to an individual attempting to make meaningful and sustainable change.



Picture success as it could be. Identify a meaningful and positive visualisation of what change could look like. This creates an anchor for the process and makes it worthwhile. For example, running magazines will use idealized images of athletic, smiling people running in beautiful places. Our brains connect to these images of what *could* be. To create motivation for change in other aspects of our lives we can use the same trick. You might be working on your delegation skills so your picture of success could include you being much more relaxed and happy as your workload decreases, or perhaps success means a longed-for promotion. Whatever it is, get your brain on board!

Break it down into achievable steps and stages. Find measurable targets and stepping stones along the way. As we've already established, big change is hard for your brain to process. By starting with more achievable steps you give the brain the best chance to move in the right direction. By building the first step into a new habit (and therefore intuitive) it provides a platform to move on to the next step without becoming overwhelmed. Going back to our example of delegation, perhaps the first step is to start regularly involving your colleague or team member in meetings regarding a project or task. Get your brain used to that and you're on your way!

Find accountability by making commitments. Establish a process of tracking your progress. Marshall Goldsmith (see reading list) suggests you identify a person to call you on an allotted day every week to ask you if you are meeting your targets. It is easier to break a commitment you have made only to yourself, so providing yourself with external accountability may strengthen your resolve. There's research to back this up – including a study by Cialdini who found that students were much more likely to turn up to a 7am meeting once they had made a commitment to someone else. Use that natural people-pleasing nature we all have to get your brain to follow through on commitments!

Reward yourself along the way to maintain motivation. Build rewards into your change plan to keep you motivated. We've already said that change is hard, your System One thinking will resist it and will naturally fight to pull you back into your comfort zone of reflexive, intuitive responses. By finding a way to create a positive association with the new behaviours you will support their adoption. We know, from work by Olds & Milner, how the creation of a link between stimulation of the brain's reward centre and specific behaviours can work in establishing patterns of behaviour – use that understanding to your advantage in making change!

Check in to review your progress and adapt. Regularly evaluate both the end goal and the plan to get there. As you progress along your journey of self-improvement, it is important to make sure that you are progressing towards that future picture. The thing is, you'll have to distinguish between it being hard and being wrong. Perhaps involving the team member in the meetings isn't helping you delegate to them because it is actually making them feel overwhelmed, so less able to contribute. Change it up. Go back to your picture of success, break it down into steps and find a new course.

Practice to establish new habits. The more you practice a behaviour, the more habitual it becomes and the more skillful you will be. The role of practice is a hot topic in sport these days, after people like Matthew Syed began to argue that 'talent' as a concept has been overestimated. Syed used the development of international level table tennis to demonstrate the role that repetition and practice plays in developing what many would perceive of talent. Use that understanding to turn new habits from something that you *can* do to something that you do.

Support to make personal and organisational change happen

We work with a whole range of organisations and individuals on projects which relate to the performance of staff at work. This can extend from coaching an individual to improve their effectiveness in their role through to supporting an organisation in shifting the culture of their entire workforce. At the heart of all these projects lies an understanding of how to support individuals to develop new habits; otherwise known as behavior change. When you talk to us about helping you develop your own potential or the potential of your team then expect us to use our understanding of habit change and behavior formation to drive our approach.

As George Bernard Shaw suggested in the quote we used at the beginning of this report, achievement in life could be seen as working to develop into the best version of ourselves. There are challenges and there may be setbacks, and mastering personal change will not always be comfortable, but the development of mindsets and strategies which allow us to confront and manage it without fear brings rewards in both our work and personal lives.

Further Reading and source references:

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- Dweck, C. (2006) *Mindset: How you can fulfill your potential*. Hachette UK.
- Goldsmith, M. (2015) *Triggers: creating behaviour that lasts*. Profile Books.
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- Lipton, D. (2013) "Reward Centers" in the Brain and Lessons for Modern Neuroscience. neurowest.org/blog
- Peters, S. (2012) *The Chimp Paradox: The Mind Management Programme to Help you Achieve Success, Confidence and Happiness*. Vermillion.
- Senge, P. (1990) *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organisation*. Random House.
- Syed, M. (2010) *Bounce: The Myth of Talent and the Power of Practice*. London, HarperCollins

For something lighter, why not try Leo Babauta's Zen Habits Blog. [Zenhabits.net](http://zenhabits.net)