

THE POWER OF HABIT

Why we do what we do in life and business

Charles Duhigg

Reviewed by Jill Rigney.

Habits – we all know we have them!! They can be our making or our undoing. Either way, they are powerful. On a personal level, the majority of our day will be governed by a series of habits whether good or bad. These habits reside largely in our subconscious mind, so we are unaware of them and don't understand them.

Also, understanding habits at an organisational and social level is extremely powerful in directing group focus towards a specific outcome. For example, marketers use group habits activate consumer spending habits, and wise leaders utilise them to create strong institutional habits.

This book is a well-researched look at how habits work, their impact on not only our own lives but also that of organisations and society. It definitely does not fall into that dubious category of solutions based on the author's homespun remedies. Rather, it is a serious look at the science of habit formation and change.

Who is Charles Duhigg?

Charles Duhigg is a reporter at *The New York Times*, where he writes for the business section. For this book Duhigg read hundreds of scientific papers and interviewed many of the scientists who wrote them. Accordingly, he presents a wide array of interesting findings on habit formation and change from the fields of social psychology, clinical psychology and neuroscience.

There are three parts to the book:

PART I: THE POWER OF HABITS IN OUR PERSONAL LIVES

- Covers the importance of habits, how they are formed, what it takes to change them and introduces the concept of 'Keystone Habits'.

PART II: THE POWER OF HABITS IN BUSINESSES AND ORGANISATIONS

- Introduces institutional routines, keystone habits in organisations, willpower and how companies instill habits in their customers

PART III: THE POWER OF HABITS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

- Case studies about changes in society and their impact. Includes Rosa Parks, The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Civil Rights Movements

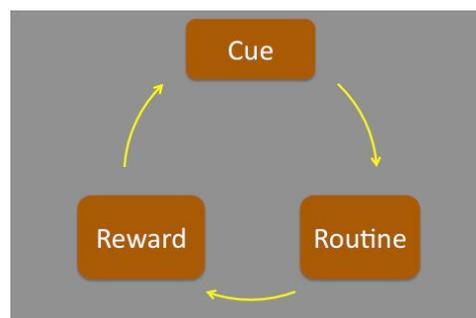
The Power of Habits in our Personal Lives

The first part of the book focuses on the role that habits play in our personal lives and their importance. Duhigg starts with looking at the major reasons they exist through the following five areas.

1. Conserving mental energy – any behaviour that can be reduced to a routine is one less behaviour that we must spend time and energy consciously thinking about and deciding upon. Habits therefore free up time and energy for other matters. As Duhigg puts it, “this effort-saving instinct is a huge advantage... [for] an efficient brain... allows us to stop thinking constantly about basic behaviours, such as walking and choosing what to eat, so we can devote mental energy to inventing spears, irrigation systems, and, eventually, airplanes and video games”.

Duhigg then moves into the area of how they are formed and how our brains fall into habits and draws on the research from disciplines such as – advertising, sports, addiction, religion and others. According to Duhigg, it comes down to a simple, three-part loop: cue, routine and reward.

2. Three-part loop. In the author’s own words: “first, there is a *cue*, a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then there is the *routine*, which can be physical, mental or emotional. Finally, there is a *reward*, which helps your brain figure out if this particular loop is worth remembering for the future”. If everything lines up, the brain ‘remembers’ the loop, and is predisposed to using the same routine when the same cue comes up again in the future.



The more often the brain uses the loop to good effect the deeper the behaviour becomes ingrained – to the point where the behaviour itself becomes more and more automatic. Eventually, the cue ends up being so bound up with the reward that the cue itself will trigger a craving for the reward: “the cue and reward become intertwined until a powerful sense of anticipation and craving emerges”. Habits could be brought about by a craving for positive emotions, or accomplishment or relationships.

As Duhigg explains, “habits emerge without our permission”; for example, “studies indicate that families usually don’t intend to eat fast food on a regular basis. What happens is that a once a month pattern slowly becomes once a week, and then twice a week – as the cues and rewards create a habit – until the kids are consuming an unhealthy amount of hamburgers and fries”.

3. Changing habits. This is of course the part that most of us want to understand. Once habits are set they can be very difficult to change. In fact, studies indicate that once habits are formed in the brain, they become encoded in the structures therein, and can never truly be eradicated – only replaced with a stronger habit.

According to Duhigg, the most effective way to modify your habits is to attack the habit loop directly, and to replace an old routine that is associated with a particular cue and reward, with a new routine. This is known as the golden rule of habit change: “you can never truly extinguish bad habits. Rather, to change a habit, you must keep the old cue, and deliver the old reward, but insert a new routine”.

The first task is to identify the cue that is triggering the routine (this may be anything from a location, a time of day, an emotional state, the presence of certain other people etc. Second, is to identify the reward that the habit is bringing you. This can be more difficult, as the reward is sometimes masked among other things. Once you have identified the cue that triggers your habit, and the reward that it brings, it is time to come up with a plan to replace your current habit/routine with a new one. As simple as this technique sounds, it has actually been used to successfully treat such conditions as “verbal and physical tics, depression, smoking, gambling problems, anxiety, bedwetting, procrastination, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and other behavioural problems”.

4. The importance of ‘keystone’ habits. When we look at the habits we might like to change for some of us the list can be long so the above process may sound long and tedious to get through them all. The good news is there are ‘keystone’ habits. Keystone habits are those, when changed, set off a chain reaction that extends to all aspects of a person’s life: “some habits, in other words, matter more than others in remaking... lives. These are ‘keystone habits,’ and they can influence how people work, eat, play, live, spend and communicate. Keystone habits start a process that, over time, transforms everything”.

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The vital thing here is to identify these keystone habits and then only focusing on one or two of them; ie. you give up smoking and as a new routine introduce exercising or eating a meal as family.

5. The importance of belief and communities of support – when you are trying to change your habits, small wins can provide an important sense of belief that this change is in fact possible and then these small wins can be built on with more wins. Duhigg uses the example of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) which instills in its members the ‘belief’ small wins are possible and important whilst at the same time, providing the essential support and constant reassurance through their group processes.

Duhigg sums up this first section this way: “we know that a habit cannot be eradicated—it must, instead, be replaced. And we know that habits are most malleable when the Golden Rule of habit change is applied: If we keep the same cue and the same reward, a new routine can be inserted. But that’s not enough. For a habit to stay changed, people must believe change is possible. And most often, that belief only emerges with the help of a group”.

The Power of Habits in Business and Organisations

The second part of the book concentrates on how habits help shape businesses and organisations. Duhigg explores how the formation of habits and routines within organisations is unavoidable. The important factor is how we manage and use these habits.

1. Institutional routines & the issue of power. Without institutional habits organisations would quite simply never get any work done or done properly; ie. safety procedures, selling policies, credit and finance policies.

Institutional habits are not only necessary to keep operations running, but—perhaps even more importantly—to prevent an entire organisation from falling apart in a mess of ambition and rivalry between its members. Duhigg reminds us, “companies aren’t big happy families where everyone plays together nicely.” There are constant battles for resources, power and positions and one of the things that stops these battles from being waged out in the open and bringing the company to ruin is the fact that there are routines and procedures in place that are or should be habitually followed.

Keystone habits in businesses and organisations. Keystone habits also exist in organisations, and are capable of having a powerful impact. An example of this is how Paul O’Neill, CEO of Alcoa between 1987 and 2000, targeted a particular keystone habit to help turn around the then failing, but once great American aluminum company. The keystone habit that O’Neill targeted was workplace safety. It is also important to note how negatively the stockmarket reacted to this when O’Neill made this his priority as soon as he took on the job of turning around the company.

How did this one habit manage to transform the entire company? As O'Neill explains it, "you can't order people to change. That's not how the brain works. So I decided I was going to start by focusing on one thing. If I could start disrupting the habits around one thing, it would spread throughout the entire company". O'Neill knew that the one habit that he chose would have to be one that would bring the entire organisation together. In other words, he knew that the habit he chose would have to be one that was of interest to everyone, unions and managers alike—and workplace safety certainly fitted this bill.

The most important keystone habit of all: willpower. Duhigg uses the story of Starbucks to highlight the most important keystone habit of all: willpower. Interestingly, willpower appears to be something that works just like a muscle, in that it can be worn out if it is over worked, but can also be built up through a routine of willpower exercise. In other words, as Duhigg puts it; "willpower can be made into a habit and it was this focus for staff development that had profound outcomes".

"As people strengthened their willpower muscles in one part of their lives—in the gym, or a money-management program—that strength spilled over into what they ate or how hard they worked. Once willpower became stronger, it touched everything". In an effort to harness the incredible potential of willpower, the company Starbucks set out in the late 1990's to create a new training program for its frontline workers that would transform them into models of self-discipline. A program that has subsequently been modelled, by many others since.

How companies instill habits in their customers. Having explored how businesses and organisations cultivate habits in their organisations and among their employees, Duhigg turns his attention to how companies instill habits in their customers. Lets ask the question: if a company can successfully create a habit out of buying their product or coming to their store would this fundamentally change the company's position in the market place? The answer is obviously yes.

The chapter is very much a series of case studies of which the first relates to the US product of Pepsodent toothpaste. In the early 1900's, when Pepsodent first got its start, almost nobody bought toothpaste. People's reluctance to buy toothpaste had nothing to do with the fact that they had poor dental hygiene. On the contrary, as Duhigg explains, "it was no secret that the health of Americans' teeth was in steep decline. As the nation had become wealthier, people had started buying larger amounts of sugary, processed foods. When the government started drafting men for World War I, so many recruits had rotting teeth that officials said poor dental hygiene was a national security risk" There were plenty of door-to-door salesmen hawking products but no one was buying. And yet, within a decade of Pepsodent's introducing its toothpaste, almost half of all Americans brushed their teeth on a daily basis.

Pepsodent's advertiser, Claude Hopkins, developed a clever little ad campaign that drew on the principle of the cue, routine and reward habit loop. Specifically, the cue that Hopkins targeted was that thin layer of film that you can feel on your teeth when you run your tongue over them first thing in the morning. The reward that Hopkins promised was a mouthful of beautiful teeth. However, this is only half of the story. In addition to having a clever ad campaign, Pepsodent also contained a few ingredients that other toothpastes did not. Specifically, it contained "citric acid, as well as doses of mint oil and other chemicals". These ingredients made Pepsodent taste fresh and "they're irritants that create a cool, tingling sensation on the tongue and gums" As it turns out, this clean, tingling sensation is something that really struck a chord with users, and is a sensation that actually cultivates a craving. If it wasn't there, their mouths didn't feel clean" even though these ingredients have nothing to do with cleaning your teeth.

Duhigg relates number stories like the above including the one where the soapy foam when shampooing does nothing to assist in cleaning your hair but given the effect it does and therefore assist in creating the habit of using it.

The power of habits in social movements

The third and final part of the book examines the importance of habits in social movements, such as the civil rights movement of the 1960's. Duhigg argues that some of the greatest social reforms have, in part been produced by rewiring social habits. He links the pressure of weak ties and social norms with habit.

We learn that social movements tend to be a three-part process as he explains, "a movement **starts** because of the social habits of friendship and the strong ties between close acquaintances. It **grows** because of the habits of a community, and the weak ties that hold neighborhoods and clans together. And it **endures** because leaders give participants new habits that create a fresh sense of identity and a feeling of ownership". Duhigg focuses in on the civil rights movement of the 1960's, beginning with Rosa Parks and the Montgomery bus boycott to explain his case.

Rosa, a black woman, refused to give up her seat on a public bus to a white rider. The immediate effect of this action was that Parks was arrested, but the act would also set the stage for one of the biggest and most successful social movements of the 20th century: "at that moment, though no one on that bus knew it, the civil rights movement pivoted. That small refusal was the first in a series of actions that shifted the battle over race relations from a struggle fought by activists in courts and legislatures into a contest that would draw its strength from entire communities and mass protests". Rosa Parks was not the first black person to be arrested for violating Montgomery's bus segregation laws. Those previous arrests did not start a mass movement, however, while Rosa's did. So, what was the difference? Duhigg suggests it was because Rosa Parks was a very popular lady, in that she was "deeply respected and embedded in her community" and had many, many friends in many walks of life.

Within hours, two of Rosa's friends, E.D. Nixon and Clifford Durr, had posted her bail, and had taken her home. But their involvement didn't end there. Durr was a white lawyer, and Nixon a man involved with the NAACP, and both had been looking for a prominent case to challenge the segregation laws on Montgomery's buses.

As news of Parks' arrest continued to spread through Montgomery, another of Parks' friends, a woman named Jo Ann Robinson—who was "the president of a powerful group of schoolteachers involved in politics caught wind of Parks' plight. Robinson immediately called a meeting of the teachers and parents of students that she knew and suggested that they promote a boycott of Montgomery's buses on the day that Parks was to appear in court. When news circulated that a bus boycott was going to be held in support of Parks, Parks' friends immediately signed on.

Thus we see how the first step in successful social movements, the support of close friends, played a part in this case. Now that Parks' friends were involved, it remained for them to spread the word (and the pressure to join in) through their own social networks, and the wider groups and communities of which they were a part. While the term 'weak ties' may make this force sound a bit, well, weak, it is anything but. Indeed, as Duhigg explains, "when sociologists have examined how opinions move through communities, how gossip spreads or political movements start, they've discovered a common pattern: Our weak-tie acquaintances are often as influential—if not more—than our close tie friends". After all was said and done, every black church in the city (including Martin Luther King, Jr.'s) had agreed to the boycott. "The community's weak ties were drawing everyone together".

Thus from this point on, new social expectations (habits) were formed.

Summary

Duhigg's book provides important attention to the powerful role of habits in behavior. I found this to be a very thought-provoking book and an excellent read. It draws on a lot of research (60 pages of notes at the back), whilst weaving in an easily digestible series of stories.

"The Power of Habit" is available in most bookstores and in audible form from audible.com

Jill Rigney is a Senior Consultant with the Right Mind International Pty Ltd. She is a master facilitator and leader in managing group dynamics. Her specific interests are in the area of human dynamics and what it takes to shift a persons' perspective that is not working for them.