Article

HABITS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

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How to work actively with habits to ensure that you and your organisation become the best versions of yourselves.

Habits control a large part of our lives. The vast majority of actions we perform personally and professionally are controlled by a set of habits we have formed throughout our lives. This basically means that if we want to do something different such as delivering even better results at work, e.g. increase productivity, strengthen collaboration across departments, introduce new processes or work procedures or increase job satisfaction, we need to work on our habits. In this short article, we zoom in on a few of the "secret ingredients" that those who have succeeded in changing habits for the better have used. If you are curious about learning more about these "ingredients" and how you might work with your own habits and help others create lasting behavioural changes (habits) in your organisation, then please read on.

Build habits that make a difference

Habits. We all have them. Both the good and the bad. Habits are inveterate behaviour that we are often not aware of. The question is how to make our good habits unfold naturally and how to make our unwanted habits disappear to a greater extent so that we can be the best version of ourselves when we are at work.

This exact question about habits and how we can be the best version of ourselves was the reason why we in June 2019 invited groundbreaking author and expert
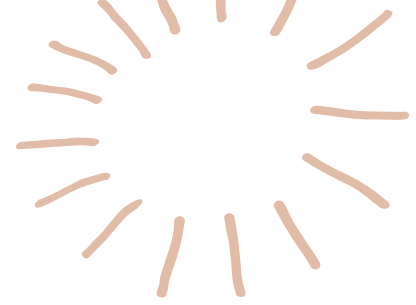
in habits and behaviour James Clear to Implement. We wanted his help and sparring to explore how to form habits that make a difference and make the behavioural changes stick. Based on several years of intensive work on habits and behavioural changes as well as a weekly blog, James Clear has written the New York Times best-seller "Atomic Habits". Here, he presents a new and unique way of working with habit design. A way that helps us form new habits.

And how is this relevant in a work-related context?

Too often, focus is on doing something different in the context of change/transformation in organisations, whereas focus is rarely on how this something is best realised in the microactions of everyday life (behaviour/habits). When even better results are to be delivered in a work-related context, it is crucial to have knowledge of behaviour, habits and what motivates new behaviour to achieve successful changes/transformations.

Forming habits is building a lifestyle

So, what exactly are habits? According to James Clear, habits are "the compound interest of self-improvement". In other words, habits can be perceived as something that contributes to the life we are living. Who we are. Habits can therefore not be broken down into something as simple as things we can check off on our to-do list. On the contrary, habits are little routines in everyday life that we need to work with throughout our lives – both our old habits and new habits that we want to form to improve our lives. This applies to both private and work-related contexts. Try to think back on some of the routines you have previously worked with to be able to master what you do as the most natural thing today. E.g. the way you do sports, the way you communicate your specialist knowledge, the way you meet new people etc. The habits you have today have not been formed out of the blue. They have been formed because you were put in a situation at a given time where

you had to try out a new behaviour for the first time. You experienced (more or less subconsciously) that this behaviour was a success, which is why you repeated the behaviour the next time the situation arose. In time, this behaviour has become natural to you and thus no longer requires much effort. It has become your habit. (Source: Wood; Duhigg; Kahneman)

But it takes mental energy to acquire new habits. As human beings, we have a preference for keeping our old habits – what we know and do not need to think about – even though they are no longer self-improving. (Source: Wood; Duhigg; Kahneman)

This particular fact is important to keep in mind when dealing with change in organisations. Especially if we to a higher degree are to succeed in initiating and embedding new self-improving habits that support change.

In the following, we will go through James Clear's approach to working with habits that consists of four defining elements.

1. Make it visible

When you are about to form a new habit, the first step is to make the habit clear by placing visible signs in the physical spaces in which you move around and reducing whatever pulls the attention in the wrong direction.

For example, if you want to become better at prioritising your time in order to act more proactively rather than reactively, you could consider scheduling time in your calendar where you prioritise your time. You could also consider putting something on your computer to remind you to practise this behavioural microchange in your everyday life. For instance, if you want to change the habit of checking emails during meetings, it is important that you decide on something to remind you of your new habit. It could be the notification about the meeting popping up on your computer screen or grabbing the door handle to enter the meeting room.

Another example is if your team is about to collaborate in new ways, e.g. during meetings where you want to ensure that everyone is heard. Here, you can break away from the way you usually sit during meetings to make it visible for everyone that you are working together to succeed in implementing a new behaviour. On a more personal level, if you want to break away from the habit of checking your phone and emails as soon as you wake up in the morning, you can place your telephone in another room before going to bed. The most important thing is that it is clear to everyone involved – regardless whether it is just yourself or your team – that "something" has changed from what we usually do.

2. Make it attractive

The next step is about making the habit stick. To succeed in this, you need to make the new habit attractive. You can do this if you are aware of what you normally long for and if you can use this awareness to predict your actions. The attractive part is to a large extent a feeling or a goal you have decided on in order to form the habit. If you don't have a feeling of why changing your habit is attractive, then the habit is probably doomed to fail.

If you want to break the habit of saying yes too often and thereby not prioritising your time, you can make it attractive to say no by writing down what you gain if you succeed in changing the habit. This could be higher quality in your deliverables, staying ahead of the game or having the opportunity to immerse yourself in something. It may be attractive to change the habit of checking emails during meetings because you will have a better foundation for participating in the work afterwards. Or if we move the furniture, the attractive part could be that the energy in the room is higher and more constructive for the purpose of the meeting. If you place your phone away from the bedside table, the attractive part could be to look your better half in the eyes first thing in the morning. Or it could be to have time for two minutes of concentrated breathing to get a better

start to the day – something you have wanted to succeed in. The most important thing is that the attractive part about changing your habits is something that you and whoever is involved in the change benefit from – and it has to be clearly stated.

3. Make it easy to get started with the change

In the third stage of the habit change, it is all about making it as easy as possible to practise the new habit. Here, focus is on: "What is the smallest/lightest/easiest action we can perform that supports microchange?"

Let's assume that the attractive part related to the habit change in terms of the prioritisation of your time is to stay ahead of the game. In this phase, you could ask yourself: "What is the easiest thing I could do that will have a positive effect on this goal?" For instance, it could be a dogma about only having five relevant tasks on your desk at a time. Here, the easiest way is perhaps to note your tasks in the calendar invitation you set up in step 1 (make it visible – every night). By making sure it is easy to do what you feel is attractive, you are already on your way to turning your goal into real behaviour.

If the goal of not checking emails during meetings is to become more present and focused, you can ask yourself: "What is the easiest thing I can do that will have a positive effect on this goal?" It could be to turn on "do not disturb" on the phone when the notification about the meeting pops up or to put your phone away when you enter the meeting room. And if the goal of getting your team to collaborate in new ways is a higher degree of ownership and more good ideas, then make sure that the room remains as agreed on in step 1. And last but not least, if the goal of not checking your phone and emails as soon as you wake up in the morning is to get a better start to the day, then you could place a pillow on the floor next to the bed so that you only have to sit down on it to get your two minutes of breathing.
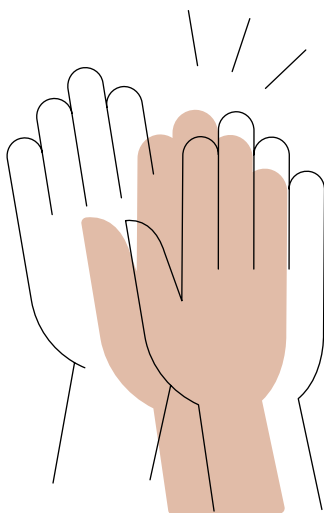
4. Include rewards

Lastly, you need to make sure that the new behaviour is repeated. Here, it is all about the reward. You have already described what is attractive about your habit change. Therefore, you need to be aware of whether you are fulfilling this, or if you have missed the target. In the latter case, you may consider whether the result is still attractive and just different, or if you need to try a different habit change to succeed. The speed at which the reward comes is crucial. An effort will not be repeated if a reward is given two months later. However, it will be repeated if praise is given along with the effort. In the same way, you need to make sure that there is a connection between the expected reward and what is actually happening.

To make the reward visible, you can track your new habit to have a visual representation of how you succeed day by day (see James Clear's habit tracker for inspiration in the references below). You can also share your goal with others to get some recognition for succeeding in situations where you wish to be perceived differently. The reward can thus be the experience of succeeding in forming the habit, but it can also be to achieve what is attractive.

If you succeed in saying yes to fewer tasks and have clear expectations of staying ahead of things, then you will have a two-part reward. First, you should feel that you have an increased overview and focus. Your colleagues can help with providing feedback on this. Second, you should be able to see in your tracker that you succeed in writing down your tasks for the next day on a regular basis.

Or if you succeed in putting your phone away when you enter a meeting room, you will experience higher quality later on in working with the content of the meeting, but your habit tracker will also tell you that you are succeeding in connecting your entry into the meeting room with putting your phone away. Your team will also find it rewarding that collaboration is improved due to the new setup, but final reflections and tracking with the team about whether they have succeeded in practising their new roles during the meeting may be put up on the wall as a reminder of your time together.

Identity-based habits – if you want them to stick

The final and perhaps most important "secret ingredient" in achieving the best results in changing habits and making them stick is related to the "identity concept". As the first in the field of habits, James Clear focuses on how identity and change of identity can be the deciding factor that actually becomes the driving force in getting us motivated to change our "complex interest in self-improvement".

As James Clear puts it, our habits and behaviour can be seen as echoes reflecting our identity. If the new behaviour is to stick and become a new habit, we actually need to start believing in ourselves in new ways. In other words, we also change parts of our identity when we change habits and behaviour.

When we build new habits, it is not just about habit or behaviour design. It is about embracing, visualising and articulating the identity we want to have or already have to some extent. For instance, if you are dreaming about reading the latest literature within your field, then initially you need to see yourself as someone who reads. Instead of saying "I need to read at least one specialist book every month", you say "I am a person who reads the latest specialist literature", and from here you create your habit design. So, instead of focusing on the result you want to achieve, you embed a new identity and thereby significantly increase the likelihood of succeeding in anchoring your microactions into something that eventually becomes new habits. In fact, every little action you take helps build the identity that characterises the person you are. A crucial step towards the new identity is to dare say it out loud to others so that they are also able to provide feedback on the behaviour they see you practise in your everyday life.

So, let us revisit our previous examples one last time and take a look at the identity that can be stored here.

Instead of saying "I have to say no to tasks", you will say "I am a person who prioritises my time" with the identity-based approach if you want to become better at prioritising your time, and the habit design that is to support this identity will be built based on the four steps:

- "A person who prioritises his/her time performs the following actions in everyday life …"
  (Step 1 – make it visible)

- "It is attractive for me to do, as it gives me …"
  (Step 2 – make it attractive)

- "I can make it easy for myself to perform this action by …"
  (Step 3 – make it easy)

- "When I have performed the action, I mark it in my tracker …" or "I know I have succeeded when …"
  (Step 4 – include rewards)

In the end, it is not so much about what the result should be but rather who you are and how you organise the process to get there. The process can very well be framed by making the new behaviour visible – attractive – easy – rewarding, but it is not until your habits support the person you want to be and what you want to accomplish that you can be sure they stick.

James Clear's biography:

The founder of Habits Academy, James Clear, shares the latest scientific research on habits, decision-making processes and human potential. James Clear's work and approach have been used by several Fortune 500 companies as well as sports teams and athletes in the NFL, NBA and MBL.

His book, New York Times best-seller "Atomic Habits", offers a framework that can make us 1% better each day as well as a guide on how to design a system that makes our good habits flourish naturally and our unwanted habits disappear.

www.habitsacademy.com

www.jamesclear.com

https://jamesclear.com/habit-tracker

https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/ulterior-motives/200905/if-you-want-succeed-don-t-tell-anyone

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FAST FACTS
ABOUT IMPLEMENT

Founded: 1996
Number of employees: 900
Offices: Copenhagen, Aarhus, Stockholm, Malmo, Oslo, Zurich and Munich
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