



Are We Destined to Be Creatures of Habit?

A review and summary of the book: [The Power of Habit: Why we do what we do in life and business](#)

by Thomas B. Wilson

We are all guided each day by our habits. What is a habit? While there are technical definitions, Charles Duhigg in [The Power of Habit: Why we do what we do in life and business](#) (Random House, 2012) defines a habit as a choice that we make about taking a certain action and then continue doing this action often every day. Every time we get a certain cue, we take this action. Consider this: what do you do when your alarm rings in the morning? Do you get up, do you turn it off and listen to the radio, do you hit the snooze button, or do you turn it off and go back to sleep? What brand of toothpaste do you buy? How often do you exercise?

Consider another example: What do you do when it is ten minutes before a meeting, and the meeting is just down the hall? Then, what happens if you see an email from Groupon? What do you do when you see an email from a friend or your significant other? It is now 5 minutes before the meeting starts. What do you do when you get a text from your son or daughter, your boss, your long time friend with whom you have plans tonight? Do you make it to the meeting on time?

Behaviors, and the things we do, are often influenced by a number of factors. This book provides a very powerful framework for understanding our behaviors and developing a roadmap for restructuring our own behaviors or those of others. It is not a self-help book or a treatise on some psychological theory. It provides a simple framework to understand why we do what we do and how we can do something about it. It demonstrates that we are not victims of our behavioral habits and past experiences. We can make changes when we understand how we respond to certain cues.

Once we understand some of the primary drivers of individual behavior, Duhigg goes on to define how these practices are helpful to understand and lead organizations and elements of our society. He shows dramatic changes created by Alcoa, Starbucks, and Target, and explains in part why these organizations have been so successful. He shows how creating a “craving” leads to successful product marketing. He helps us understand how the Montgomery Alabama busing boycott became the pivot point for the Civil Rights movement in the United States. It can become a guidebook for those seeking to create, facilitate and lead change in a work team, a family, an organization or a country.

By understanding “how things work,” we gain the ability to modify these forces. His model, which is well founded in both physiological and behavioral research, is easy to understand and discuss. It does not provide “how to” answers or clever tricks. These seldom work. But he does provide insights and ideas

that one might just find very helpful. There are many applications, and he encourages the reader to experiment and take control of one's own habits.

So what are the elements that influence our habits? First, we start with a “cue” – the alarm rings, your email pings, someone walks into the room, you sit down at a slot machine or at a bar. Then, you take some action or routine as Duhigg calls it. Then, you get something for this – a reward. A reward is something that you regard as positive and meaningful – a smile, a thank you, new information, satisfaction, the jackpot or a bonus. When your response first started, it was more deliberate. You had to think about your response and be deliberate in your response. The reward was something that you probably cherished. Then, over many successive times, you respond similarly to the cue, and you experience the same (or similar) reward. This is good, so you do it again. You may not receive it every time, but you do frequently enough to reinforce your expectations and your response. Duhigg refers to this as the “habit loop.” Think about how a child learns to walk – what happens when he or she stands holding onto a table, when he or she takes that first venture away from the table? Now, he or she never thinks about the action of walking; it comes naturally. It just happens that way. It has become a habit.

Perhaps 95% to 98% of our habits serve us well. They enable us to read, build relationships, drive cars, go between home and work, and a thousand things we do every day. But, there are some habits that create obesity, risk our livelihood, create conflicts, create fears and insecurities, or are dysfunctional to yourself or others. Is that who you are? The question is: are these desired or undesired behaviors?

If we examine the cues and the consequences (rewards as well as punishments), we can begin to untangle this pattern of behavior. One of the clear messages in Duhigg's book is that behaviors can change. He has many ideas for understanding the cues, behaviors, feelings and rewards associated with the process of the habit loop. Then, he shows how people have modified the cues, behaviors and rewards to create new habits. Unfortunately, the old habits don't go away; they are often encoded into the structure of our brains, but new habits can be formed as an alternative. You have a choice, and once the new choice becomes a habit, the dysfunctional behavior fades into memory. Some call this learning, personal development, or growth. We have the power to change many things, but it takes an understanding of the current habit loop and then serious attention to create a new “routine.” When we start with small, focused actions, and achieve a desired result (i.e., the reward), then, the new action becomes something that we prefer than the old pattern. It may not be easy at first, many habits are well entrenched in our brains and patterns, but it can be done. He shares many powerful stories of how people over came horribly entrenched, destructive habits.

Duhigg also shows how large corporations have changed their culture. What is culture? Think of it as the collective habits of a community. Organizations can pursue the same path. Look at culture as what actions are reinforced and punished within the workplace. He describes how Alcoa utilized a commitment to employee safety to transform the productivity, innovation, product quality and profitability of the company. It didn't happen by luck or accident; it was a conscious strategy of Paul O'Neill, the new CEO. He describes how Starbucks has been able to transform individuals whose lives were at risk to crime, abuse or drug addiction, into model citizens and successful employees and managers. These people then create the customer experience that has generated significant revenues

and profits for Starbucks. He also describes how Proctor & Gamble used these concepts in many products that transformed the home and their business. These stories are inspiring and meaningful to anyone interested in creating a high performing workplace.

Mr. Duhigg only touches the surface of the major disciplines of behavior analysis, behavioral economics, brain science and change management. He brings into sharp and simple focus the core forces that influence our behaviors, performance and habits. By understanding the forces that drive human behavior and organizational performance, only then can we truly become masters of them. This book makes a major contribution to this end, and does so in a way that is engaging and entertaining. I suggest you read this book and examine your own habits and the habits you help create in others. It is wise to remember that if we always do what we've always done, we may end up getting what we've always gotten. Is that what you want?