

Article: Why is it so hard to change our habits and learn new future skills

By Debbie Craig and Armin Philipps

There is enormous pressure to accelerate our learning and readiness for change in this new ever-evolving world of exponential change – catching up on new trends, tech, apps .. never mind figuring out how to collaborate, crowdsource or engage with the gig economy effectively. We are expected to be more **curious** (explore and learn faster), more **creative** (experiment and innovate), more **courageous** (lead through uncertainty and ambiguity), more **conscious** (on how we show up), more **critical** (in how we discern and decide), more **collaborative** (in the way we engage), better **change** influencers (to drive impact) and bigger **contributors** (that make a difference). We also have a constant battle wishing for change or improvement in our personal lives (healthier habits, less digital distraction, managing our stressors and saying no) but struggling to stick to our good intentions. And yet after many good intentions, goal setting sessions, personal development plans, vision boards, coaching sessions and learning programs, we still struggle to overcome our default personalities, preferences and habits to fundamentally and consistently change to achieve the results we desire – either personally or professionally.

Why is it so hard to change our habits and make new (and better one's) stick?

We believe that the answer lies in understanding how our really works. The good news is that our BRAINS and the we think, process information, respond emotionally and make decisions **CAN CHANGE**. Science has proven that our brains are malleable and can be re-trained and re-organised to work more effectively. This is known as neuroplasticity.



brain
way

Neuroplasticity = the ability of the brain to form and reorganize synaptic connections, especially in response to learning or experience

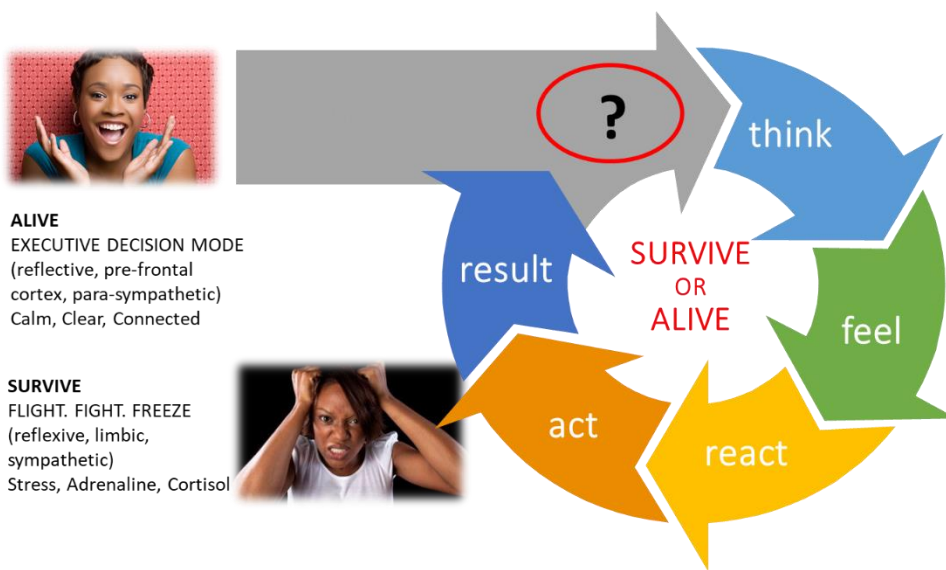
The challenge with this simple statement is that it takes a willingness to understand what is required and a deep commitment to doing the daily work - to literally re-wire the brain to think and perceive our realities differently. Our neural pathways are deeply ingrained, our automatic responses hard-wired and it is all too easy to relax into our comfort zones and default behaviours than to do the work that is required. As Malcolm Gladwell concludes in *Outliers* – it takes 10 000 hours to master a new skill. (**Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell). This translates into a daily practice of a new skill an hour a day. Under the right conditions, with the correct mindset, coaching and learning attitude, we should be able to attain proficiency in just over three years. Imagine the possibilities!

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.” Barack Obama

A simple view of how we typically operate

Imagine a morning where you wake up refreshed and ready for the day. You are in a good mood and feeling calm, clear and connected with your goals, plans and attitude for the day. Then you remember that you have a tough negotiation to face and you are not sure of your ability to achieve the outcome you need. Or you may have a difficult discussion and need to deliver a tough message knowing that the person will react really badly and possibly get angry, defensive, resign, reject you or become unproductive or toxic for an extended period of time. You start **thinking** about how uncertain or difficult these conversations are going to be and how much negative emotions or

conflict or fall out they might result in. You start **feeling** anxious, frustrated, maybe even angry at the person or situation and possibly a little guilty as you think about what you could have done differently to prevent things getting to this point. Notice how your body **reacts** as your shoulders drop, your hands and jaw tenses, your heart rate accelerates and your breathing gets faster and shallower. You may find yourself **acting** this out by getting irritated with your spouse, kids or the other idiot drivers in traffic and getting yourself all worked up about what could go wrong, go wrong, go wrong .. possibly messing up that team target or planned promotion you have been chasing. The **result**? Anxiety, Stress, Tension. All of this can happen in a matter of seconds, as our brains switch from our **ALIVE brain state** (pre-frontal cortex, parasympathetic nervous system) in which we are calm, clear and connected ... to our **SURVIVE brain state** (limbic system, sympathetic nervous system, fight, flight, freeze state) in which our bodies are flooded with adrenaline and cortisol and develop a stress response in readiness to fight, flight or freeze. We believe (at a sub-conscious level) that our survival is under threat and we need to divert all of our resources (oxygen, glucose, chemicals, etc.) that usually feed our thinking brain get diverted to our reacting brain and limbs ready for immediate defensive action. We therefore stop thinking clearly and rationally and are the victims of our ancient, automatic programs.



Why do we react like this?

Everything we experience in our lives is based on our past experiences, which creates our **perceptions around the possible result of this coming situation**. If we perceive a situation as bad (the difficult conversation), it will create negative feelings in our bodies such as fear and anxiety. The body will send signals to the hypothalamus (our control center for responses to outside stimulus), which in turn prompts hormone production in the pituitary glands (the stress hormone cortisol) and gets our body ready for the 'fight'.

The main reason we react to this pending conversation in such a way is that we have **experienced similar situations** like this one before, and more often than not, the results were not pretty. Our brain now knows or assumes (based on these past experiences) what is very likely going to happen and gets the body ready the most likely predetermined stressful outcome. Each time this happens we build a stronger and stronger neural path / belief i.e. difficult conversations = anxiety = conflict = pain OR change = hard = stressful = loss. Over time, our perceptions and embedded neural pathways create our responses, our habits and therefore our reality - before we are even able to make a choice.

For positive habits such as brushing our teeth, wearing our seatbelts and telling our children we love them, these autopilot behaviours can be very useful and healthy. However, when we want to change some of these deeply ingrained behaviours and habits, such as being more open to change and uncertainty, trusting our collaboration partners more, competing less or allowing people or projects to fail in the interests of experimenting, innovation and learning ... this can become almost impossible. The downside of an extended stress response that is reinforced often throughout the day – in the traffic, in a difficult meeting, losing a deal, having conflict with your colleagues or spouse – is a significant negative impact on health. When cortisol floods our systems, it takes approximately 20

minutes to dissipate. Chronic high cortisol leads to widespread body damage including high blood pressure, high blood sugar, heart disease, accelerated aging, Alzheimer's disease, fatigue, obesity, diabetes, and many other effects. (* Mind to Matter, Dawson Church)

“Our brains don’t know the difference between an imaginary threat and a real one.” Dawson Church

The path to sustainable change

The greatest power to influence or shift our behaviour and habits comes at the **point of CHOICE**. This is the point at which we receive external stimuli and either perceive this as a **threat or an opportunity**. If we can raise our level of awareness and the choices we have in this moment, we can change our perception i.e. if we choose to be



confident and compassionate in the upcoming difficult conversation, knowing an authentic conversation will far more likely result in a better outcome for both parties, we can remain calm and clear in our approach. If sudden change is forced upon us in the form of a restructure or health scare, we can choose to embrace the change and actively look for the opportunities and gifts in the experience, or we can choose to get angry and resist the change and act in a passive-aggressive manner. **Change starts from within**. If we can recognize a potential stressful

situation, put the brakes on and pause before we react – we give ourselves the space to choose. We then have the option to see the situation with a new and different perspective, with new eyes, and not allowing our fully automated brain and hormone programme to run its automatic course. We need to become fit at rethinking the possibilities and outcomes of events AND reprogram our physical and emotional reactions to keep ourselves in the ALIVE brain state to make effective and rational choices to achieve the results we want. We need to build new neural pathways that become the new default over time.

It sounds too easy – there must be more to this

Changing these automatic reactions into new behaviours takes time and is not easy at first. In the moment of stress, your body is instantly flooded with stress hormones and our thinking brains are temporarily shut down making it difficult to think clearly or even remember we have a choice. Only with time and practice (remember the 10 000 hour rule), we will **remember our moment of choice** sooner and be able to change our automatic reactions and perceptions into more choice driven responses. As we catch ourselves and shift our responses, perceptions, options and our **emotional experience – we build a stronger neural path for the future** – and this becomes our new more positive empowering habit. For example: if you are unexpectedly confronted by a co-worker or spouse, you are likely to experience strong emotions instantly, such as stress, frustration, anger, fear. If your reaction to this new situation does not change instantly, you are predestined to have the same confrontational experience as you always had. You are however able to change this outcome, if you train yourself to take a deep breath, shift your perspective to alternative (positive) options and continue the conversation in a more relaxed, less emotive way. We will explore further techniques to train your brain to shift instantly in high stress scenarios in our future blogs.

Vision without action is merely a dream. Action without vision just passes the time. Vision with action can change the world. Joel A. Barker

If you want to develop your creativity, curiosity and courage; or be more critical, collaborative and conscious in your interactions; or be a more conscious, contributing change influencer – then stay tuned to the release of our future articles, and our upcoming book and toolkit, where we will discuss techniques for how to create this change from within, accelerate our ability to learn new healthy habits and achieve lasting, life changing personal and professional results. We will show you practical tools and examples to become future ready, build new mindsets and skills to survive and thrive in this rapidly changing world.

RESOURCES

Mind to Matter – Dawson Church
 Becoming supernatural – Dr Joe Dispenza
 Outliers - Malcolm Gladwell

AUTHORS



Armin F. Philipps

Armin is a 'fully imported German' and enjoying South Africa since 1994. He spent 14 years in the SA Motor industry, learning both not only business skills, but crafting his leadership capabilities. In 2006, he moved into the management consulting field as a senior resource, building businesses and getting exposed to many new fields within Leadership and talent development as well as innovation in the corporate context. Here he fell in love with the people aspect of business and the development of talent, learning and creativity. Over time he has led many advisory interventions for corporates, in South Africa and internationally. He is currently working on a leadership transformation project in Papua New Guinea.

His passions are the development of people, innovation, new learning technologies, delivering life-long learning solutions and coaching. Armin loves life, mountaineering, skiing, nature, his two sons and family. In his spare-time, he is passionate about continuous learning, reading at least one book a week, listening, searching and creating meaning for himself and others. He is currently busy setting up a start-up venture to provide a continuous, personal learning experience platform for anyone who is interested in learning. Armin holds a B(Com) equivalent (Finance & Marketing) from the Fachhochschule Landshut (Germany), a MBA (GIBS) and a M(Phil) Coaching from USB.

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Debbie is founder and MD of Catalyst Consulting which has just turned 21. Debbie and her team are courageous, creative, collaborative Catalysts connecting people with purpose in the areas of talent, learning, change and HC transformation... with a key focus on systemic solutions and behavioural and mindset shifts. Debbie has facilitated work in 5 continents in over 12 countries and run over 50 deep personal transformation workshops. Debbie has published 3 books "I am Talent", "I am Alive" and "Accelerated Learning" Debbie has hiked to Machu Pichu, Kilimanjaro, Everest Base Camp and done the Spanish and Italian Caminos and swum with dolphins in many places in the world. Debbie holds a B.Com, PDM, an MBA and is a registered Master HR Professional through the SA Board for People Practices (SABPP). She is also a game ranger and Reiki master.

Debbie's motto: Live, love, learn, laugh and let go. Be unique, be bold, be kind, make a difference.

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