



Behavioural Change

What is it? and how do we achieve it?

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Imperative

In a world where complexity compounds by the hour; technological disruptions, shifting workplace norms, global instability, our success as individuals and leaders hinges not on what we already know, but on our ability to adapt. Behavioural change isn't just about personal growth, it's a survival skill. The behaviours that served us yesterday may not be fit for tomorrow. Without the capacity to reassess and recalibrate how we act, we risk falling into patterns that no longer serve us, or worse, actively harm our relationships, organisations, and communities.

The most pressing leadership failures today aren't due to a lack of knowledge, but to an inability, or unwillingness to behave differently when the context demands it. We reward agility in theory, yet in practice we are often beholden to comfort, familiarity, and unexamined habits. Learning about behavioural change is a conscious act of reclaiming our agency. It's about choosing growth over autopilot. When leaders understand the mechanics of change, they begin to model it, and that modelling is embodied in changed behaviour.

There is also a moral imperative for those of us engaged in leadership. Leadership, at its core, is an act of influence. If your default behaviours are shaped by unchallenged biases or outdated mental scripts, you're not just failing yourself, you're potentially misguiding others. Whether you're leading a team, a classroom, or a family, the ripple effects of your behaviour are real. Learning how to change your own habits becomes the bedrock of creating healthier systems and cultures.

And the science is unequivocal: we are capable of changing, and those who learn how to change effectively perform better. A 2020 meta-analysis published in *Nature Human Behaviour*[1] found that behaviour change interventions, especially those involving self-monitoring, goal setting, and feedback, can have significant and sustained impacts on outcomes like health, productivity, and well-being. The ability to change, in other words, is not just a nice-to-have. It's a competitive advantage.

Ultimately, to learn behavioural change is to lean into the full spectrum of our humanity. It is to acknowledge that we are not static beings but works in progress. It affirms the possibility that who we are now is not the limit of who we can become. In a rapidly evolving world, there may be no skill more important than **learning how to change**, deliberately, ethically, and with resilience.

Habit or our instincts, are our learned or innate behaviours that we fall back on when we either don't have the time or simply don't possess the cognitive resources to deal with a given situation. Both also serve to protect us from danger and free up our thinking capacity.

In today's complex and fast-moving world there is a downside to over-reliance on old habits or instincts. Instead of taking the precious time to consider our actions and examine whether they are appropriate for the novel situation we are faced with, we have probably developed a growing tendency to rely on our instinctive or well-entrained behaviours. The result is that at best your behaviours have no effect, alternately, they may be inappropriate, or at worst, they are harmful and **toxic to others**.

The effects of our current behaviours become magnified when we act as leaders and not as individuals. I believe that leadership is in effect both a verb and a noun. As a verb, it is the

charge of energy, or the very behaviour, that creates the desired leadership effect, such as encouraging, motivating, inspiring, or enabling others. As a noun, it is a symbiotic complex-networked series of relationships.

Your behavioural expression of leadership, the act of leading, is something far too important and charged with so much potential for you to thoughtlessly rely on habits and instincts in its execution. Instead, if you want to be really effective, and stand out from the crowd, you should accept that you need to devote some of your precious time to learning how to be able to develop and apply the appropriate leadership behaviours that will add real impact in each novel situation.

Introduction: What Were You Thinking?

It was a phrase I heard so often growing up that it became a kind of refrain. "What were you thinking?" my mum or dad would demand as I limped home with torn trousers or a broken bike, fresh from a scrape in the woods or a misadventure in a canoe. I can honestly say I have no recollection about what I was thinking when the afore-mentioned damage occurred.

All I know was that in the heat of whatever game we were playing out in the woods and fields, somehow, I had just reacted instinctively to the bull that charged across the field at us, or to capsizing from the canoe into the cold lake. The truth? I wasn't thinking at all. I was reacting, instinctively, reflexively, without conscious thought. In those moments, behaviour happened to me, not by me.

This article begins there, in the woods, chased by a bull, soaked in lake water, heart thudding. Not just because it's a vivid story, but because it underscores the central challenge of behavioural change: much of our behaviour is not rational or deliberate. It's fast, automatic, and driven by **ancient circuitry** that doesn't always serve us well in the modern world.

Yet change is possible. We now know that the brain is malleable, capable of rewiring itself in response to new experiences. The question is not if we can change, but how. And whether we have the will to try.

Clicking repeatedly on your phone's screen for instant gratification, failing to stick to a New Year's resolution, acting before thinking through the consequences and copying the leadership behaviour of other leaders around you, seems to be our default-setting.

Developing the skill to be able to balance along the narrow sheer-sided path that keeps us focused on our positive goal-driven behaviours without becoming distracted or tired and sliding rapidly back down into the sunny comfortable valley of our habit-driven behaviours is more difficult than you might imagine.

It turns out that we are not quite so unique as we like to believe we are. Although, through the plastic nature of our brains we possess the physical and cognitive ability to change our behaviour, we appear to have an inbuilt pre-program or bias that causes us to fall back on well-engrained behaviours or instinctive actions.

Why this is the case is not entirely certain. It is most likely a simple mechanism to prevent '**cognitive overload**' to prevent us having to think about and rationalise every single thought or situation that we are presented with. Instead, if it is critically time-dependent (such as a

cricket ball hurtling towards us) we will act instinctively, either ducking and dodging the ball or snapping out a hand and catching the ball.

In this article, we'll explore why change is so hard, how habits hijack our intentions, and what it really takes, biologically, psychologically, and emotionally, to do things differently. Along the way, we'll talk about the science of neuroplasticity and the power of proactive effort.

Our Not So Unique Behaviours: The Human Glitch

Before we can change our behaviour, we have to understand why we keep repeating certain actions. Enter the world of **behavioural economics**, a field that draws back the curtain on how we really make decisions.

Humans, it turns out, are not the rational agents we imagine ourselves to be. We're riddled with biases, shortcuts and default settings that helped us survive in a prehistoric world but often trip us up in modern life.

Take **loss aversion**: we feel the sting of a loss twice as strongly as we feel the joy of a gain. This bias can make us cling on to old behaviours out of fear of losing comfort, status, or familiarity. Another sticking point for us evolutionary-advanced apes is **present bias**, which leads us to favour immediate gratification over long-term reward. Which is a key reason why that New Year's resolution to hit the gym fizzles out by February.

Other biases play their part too in ensuring that we cling on to our evolutionary past. **Status quo bias** keeps us stuck in outdated routines. **Social normalisation** pushes us to mirror the behaviours of peers, even if those behaviours are unhelpful. **Opportunity cost neglect** causes us to focus on what we're doing now, not what we're giving up by not doing something else.

Together, these biases make behavioural change less about logic and more about awareness. You can't out-think a reflex, but you can outlearn it. And that brings us to habits.

Key Leadership Insight:

Overcoming our human glitch should be a priority for anyone who finds themselves leading others. Developing our own self-leadership and learning to reframe our behaviours is a good first step. However, by far the most difficult aspect of overcoming these hard-wired behaviours is in finding the repeated time and energy to enact change.

This attentional challenge, this demand on our time and effort is, when viewed from the beginning of the journey, daunting and unappealing. Remarkably, if you view the same effort and energy expense through the rear-view **mirror of hindsight**, it won't seem that bad at all. In fact, the positive emotions associated with knowing that you have gained a little more self-control than those around you will inspire you to keep on investing in yourself.

Creatures of Habit: A Feature not a Flaw

Despite our sense of agency, a significant chunk of what we do each day is habitual. A Duke University study^[2] found that about 40% of our daily actions aren't decisions at all. They're habits, automatic routines executed with minimal thought.

This isn't a flaw; it's a feature. Habits reduce the cognitive load, freeing up mental energy for more complex tasks. Imagine having to relearn how to drive every time you sat behind the wheel. Habits make life manageable.

But they also make change hard. Once a behaviour is entrenched, the brain reroutes it to the basal ganglia the region responsible for routines. The more we repeat it, the deeper the neural pathway becomes. It's like a track through long grass that turns into a dirt road and eventually a paved road.

Breaking a habit means interrupting that flow. Building a new one means creating an entirely new route, one that feels clunky and slow until repetition makes it smooth. And that's where the miracle of neuroplasticity comes in.

Key Leadership Insight:

Habit breaking is one of your primary tasks as a leader. Put yourself in the shoes of your team members and ask yourself, why they should be motivated to take anything more than the easiest option when presented with a task? Communicating the reason 'Why' they are there, and 'Why' the organisation is trying to achieve what it wants to achieve is a daily task.

Coupled with this are the two tools you will need to dig your co-workers out of their behavioural trench and set them on a new more positive path, a path that they will over time will, through time and effort be engrained and entrained into a smooth road.

Providing the **push of motivation** that your team require, means you directing your own energy towards your team's development. Providing the **inspiration to pull** your team forward, means that you have to be exhibiting the exact same positive change behaviours as you expect from your team, and they need to witness these daily positive behaviours in your thoughts, words and deeds.

Neuroplasticity: Plastic Brains and Second Chances

For years, scientists believed the brain became fixed in adulthood. But new research has flipped that notion on its head. The adult brain is plastic and extremely capable of forming new connections, pruning old ones, and adapting in response to experience.

At birth, a neuron might have 2,500 synapses. By age three, it has 15,000. Then comes synaptic pruning, a use-it-or-lose-it process that streamlines brain function. This continues throughout life. Put quite simply 'Neurons that fire together wire together.' Those that don't, die off.

Certain behaviours can enhance neuroplasticity. Sleep consolidates learning and exercise boosts Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor (BDNF), a protein critical for nerve growth. However really bestowing a second chance on our brains boils down to **effort** and **focus**. Activities such as Mindfulness, helps embed new behaviours by enhancing attentional control.

Interestingly, studies show that physical activity boosts neuroplasticity by strengthening the hippocampus [3] a brain region vital for learning and memory. In fact, studies on mice going back nearly ten years show that exercise, in this case running, can actually stimulate **neurogenesis**, [4] the growth of new brain cells in specific regions of the brain.

Key Leadership Insight:

For leaders, the implication is clear: change isn't just possible, it's physiological. But it requires action. I once belonged to an organisation whose motto was '**Mens Sana in Corpore Sano**' I believe that the notion of a healthy mind existing in a healthy body lies at the core of neuroplasticity.

I would encourage all of you when considering stretching your brain to not attempt it in isolation from your body. In my leadership development program, I try to create an active group learning environment this is done for the following reasons:

- To stimulate thinking by exciting the nervous system and directing attentional focus.
- Reinforce the learning by challenging you physically and mentally.
- To make the learning distinctive, and as such, more easily memorable.
- To improve your energy levels, mood, and concentration.
- To enjoy 'learning by doing' with, and from, other participants.
- To allow people to re-awaken and realign their body.

Proactive Behaviours: Proactive Change

If neuroplasticity represents our potential for change, then **proactive behaviour** represents how we achieve the execution of change. Changing a behaviour isn't just a matter of desire or wanting change. We must do more than want it, we have to act repeatedly, often awkwardly at first.

Social Cognitive Theory shows us that learning is not passive. It requires attention, memory, belief, and motivation. Every time we practice a new behaviour, whether it's public speaking, mindful listening, or setting boundaries, we reinforce a neural pathway, we begin the process of turning that track through the grass, into a dirt road and then, with enough practice eventually into a paved road. As psychologist Dean Ware explains,

"When brain cells communicate frequently, the connection between them strengthens and the messages that travel the same pathway in the brain over and over begin to transmit faster and faster." [5]

This process of reinforcement and practice can be improved by tapping into multiple senses. When learning a new behaviour, you can create stronger, stickier neural connections by using powerful methods such as: Visualisation, Mental Imagery, and Sensory Cues. That's the reason why you will notice elite athletes rehearsing their moves in their mind's eye before they execute them physically. The brain doesn't always distinguish between real and imagined practice.

Key Leadership Insight:

One of your first tasks as a leader will be to try and develop Self-leadership and strong Followership in those around you. Connecting these new behaviours to as many areas of the brain as possible really helps to accelerate the development of new neural pathways. By tapping into all five senses, you can help create a form of "stickiness" that helps form neural pathways. This is also the reason why I have included physical movement and interaction as

an integral part of how I develop and change Leadership behaviours in my own leadership development program.

Effort as an Input: The Energy of Change

Behavioural change, like all complex systems, requires an energetic input. In thermodynamics, a phase transition, such as turning ice into water, doesn't happen passively. You have to add energy in the form of heat. Effort is the heat or energy that pushes our behaviours from clumsy to automatic, from intention to habit. It's the unseen work behind every visible change.

Social Cognitive Theory [6] calls this self-efficacy, the belief in our ability to act. High self-efficacy increases motivation. But it's not innate; it's built through mastery, encouragement, observation, and emotional regulation.

Now I know we all have a favourite place to read, or path to walk or run along when we want to do some serious thinking. It is almost as though we feel as if we can think better in these specific environments. **Reciprocal Determinism**, which is a core component of Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory refers to the dynamic and reciprocal interaction between your environment, your behaviours and your belief in your ability to learn or change your behaviours. The notion of reciprocal determinism is key to understanding how we develop our self-efficacy.

One interesting fact about the application of effort is that myelin, the brain's insulation, increases with practice, making behaviour transmission faster and more efficient. Effort, quite literally, rewires the brain.

Key Leadership Insight:

Leaders must create learning environments where those they are trying to develop feel a sense of connection and an increase in their self-efficacy. An environment where effort is supported, not punished. Where trial and error are expected. Where failure is seen not as weakness, but as data. This environment can exist purely in a geographic or structural sphere, by this I mean a nice space or outside area. It can equally be achieved by getting the people dynamics right. Bringing together people who will complement the learning process.

Summary: The Beauty of Becoming

So much of our daily life is spent in habit. And yet, within each of us is the power to choose a different path, to disrupt the defaults, to **rewire the self**. Real change is uncomfortable. It requires effort, belief, and a deep understanding of our inner circuitry. But it's also beautiful. Because every time we stretch, struggle, or stumble forward, we are not just learning, **we are becoming**.

I began this article recalling vivid memories of my instinctive childhood reactions, hopefully, highlighting that much of what we do is reflexive, not reflective. This set the stage for a brief plunge into the hidden architecture of behaviour: our cognitive biases such as loss aversion and present bias, our tendency toward the familiar, and the immense role of unconscious habits. These forces, while protective, often leave us ill-equipped to lead effectively in an evolving world.

Thankfully, the science of neuroplasticity offers hope. The brain isn't fixed and neither are our behaviours, it changes with experience, learning, and effort. From the reinforcement of neural pathways through repetition to the literal growth of new brain cells through exercise, we are wired for adaptation. But this potential only becomes reality when paired with action. Through proactive behaviours, like sensory learning, mindfulness, and visualisation, we can build new cognitive highways to replace the ruts of routine.

Behavioural change is not free. It comes at a cost. It demands effort, the energetic input that turns intention into habit. This isn't just metaphorical. Studies show that practice builds myelin, a neural insulator that speeds up behaviour transmission, literally rewiring the individual's brain. Leaders face an added challenge. They must then strive to create environments where such effort is welcomed and supported by those they lead. Growth doesn't occur in silence; it happens in the sandbox of shared struggle, feedback, and psychological safety.

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