

Duhigg, C. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*.

Changing Habits and Transforming Lives

Book Review by Larry Earnhart, Ph.D.

I was at a low point in my life. My marriage was gone; I was struggling in my latest career in sales and my only solace for a long time was alcohol. I knew drinking had been a factor in the demise of my relationships now and in the past. I knew that it had affected my career in the past. But alcohol had been at times my only friend and had been by my side for over 30 years, since I was 17 in fact. I was drinking a six-pack of beer or a bottle of wine a day – a functional alcoholic by many definitions. In fact, it was a habit that was ingrained in me that I could not, would not, change, no matter what the motivation. I enjoyed it. It tasted good. The buzz wasn't quite there anymore as I was habituated to it.

One day there was a final fight, a final cup of coffee thrown at me, and I left. I left my wife and my young son. I went to live in a motel. There, I tried drinking but I stopped. At what is called rock bottom and realizing that I was ready to lose access to my son, whom I love more than anything in the world, I simply decided to stop drinking. And I did. I stopped long enough so that I lost the habituation to it and the need and desire abated. I admit the desire has never gone away completely but it doesn't taste good anymore and I'm not tempted to return to the habit.

Duhigg's book called *The Power of Habit* helped me to understand how that happened. The book is not a how-to manual, but it is useful in explaining causes of problematic situations and recommending plans for success in quitting harmful behaviors. First of all, why did I start drinking and keep doing it, knowing that it helped ruin my life? Secondly, how did such a powerful habit suddenly disappear? Often we feel guilty when we want to lose weight or stop smoking (or drinking) and cannot. We are told that we just need more willpower and we can do it. Every year we spend billions of dollars on weight loss programs, smoking cessation programs and substance abuse clinics. Or if we eliminate carbs from our diet or drink only water or Tabasco sauce to purge ourselves. Or go to rehab and dry out for a month. Most of us simply return to our old habits afterward.

The Power of Habit shows how the cycle of Cue, Routine and Reward plays a strong role in our overall lives. It explains how we can leave the house, drive our car to work and get to our desk and suddenly realize we have no recollection of the entire process of putting on our coat, picking up our briefcase, getting into the car, backing out the driveway, driving our route to work and ending up in our chair. These complex processes are habits. Remember the first time you moved to a new location, perhaps starting a new job? Everything was new. You had no idea where the grocery store was, where your home was and where work was. After a few trips things became familiar and soon after that it was all in the background as a habit.

The cue is something that tells the brain that a habit, a routine is about to start. At the end of the routine there is a reward. This reward could be that you arrived at your expected normal

destination and now the brain clicks back on. For a rat it could be the cycle of a click telling the rat to run a maze which the rat knows by heart to find the food reward at the end. The cue tells your conscious brain that it can hand over its energy-consuming higher functions to the simpler and far more ancient basal ganglia.

Duhigg provides simplistic to complex models of how to modify habit and behavior. Stories include private, public, social, personal, and business situations. For example, he tells the story of a man who lost part of his brain and lost his short-term memory completely. If asked to draw a map of his home he couldn't do it yet he could get up, walk to the bathroom, use it, wash his hands and sit down again with no problem.

A key example comes from the early days of modern advertising when Claude Hopkins turned brushing teeth from a rarely performed task into a habit almost everybody does when he found the key to selling Pepsodent toothpaste. His tagline, "feel the film on your teeth with your tongue" was the cue that something needed to be done or their teeth would rot, the routine was brushing one's teeth with Pepsodent and the reward was to look beautiful with a prettier smile simply by a quick brush with that toothpaste.

A whole marketing industry has been built on Claude's findings and it continues today. But Claude had missed one thing. In order to be truly effective a sense of anticipation and of neurological craving needs to be induced. Once competitors studied what happened, the reality of Pepsodent became clear. Contrary to other dentifrices at the time it had citric acid and mint in it which slightly irritated the gums, creating a feeling we now perceive as "fresh." It is this "fresh" feeling that we anticipate which we equate with a fresh, clean mouth and that is our reward for the routine of brushing our teeth.

Think about Cinnabon stores. Are they in the food court at the mall? No, they are on their own aisle completely away from the aromatic competition of the food court. Think about the smell of fresh cinnamon buns. In most people there is something about the aroma of baking bread - and when you add the smell of butter, brown sugar and cinnamon it is nigh on irresistible and we are drawn in like flies to honey. That aroma cue has us craving the reward of the Cinnabon. And if we just pass it by, we will have a sense of disappointment.

The same process occurs with smoking, explains Duhigg. A smoker sees a cue such as a pack of cigarettes; then his brain anticipates the nicotine high and a craving is induced until the smoker feels the need to reach for that pack of cigarettes. This creates an addiction response so that "wanting evolves into obsessive craving" and our brains stop thinking consciously. In my own situation, I could not stop drinking in spite of the fact that my drinking was hampering my career, my family and my home.

Does this mean that we are foreordained to a life without change? That we are victims of our own habits? The positive side is that the same thing that creates the habit to begin with can also be used to change the habit as well. You need to start with a cue: if you want to start running every day, your cue might be lacing up your runners or leaving your workout clothes next to

your bed the night before. Then have a clear reward such as a midday snack. Envisioning the reward and feeling the craving for it gives you the impetus to continue with the routine.

Even further, in order to change a habit is to use the same cue and same reward but substitute another habit. That is what Alcoholics Anonymous does. The reward for drinking is rarely the “high” from alcohol itself. It may be “escape, relaxation, companionship, blunting of anxieties or emotional release.” AA allows members a sense of camaraderie in having meetings and the sponsor who is there to support and give personal attention to the member.

This is not meant to say that changing habits is in any way easy. Even under the best of circumstances, changing habits is problematical and multiple attempts and persistence are necessary.

When you look at corporate habit-changing, one example is outstanding. Alcoa is a company that deals with molten aluminum in various formats; mishaps and accidents can harm people, requiring costly medical bills, causing production problems and reducing morale. Alcoa brought in Paul O’Neill, a government bureaucrat, who transformed the company by changing one habit: emphasis on safety. By doing so, in 13 years the company quintupled its net earnings and stock price while becoming one of the safest companies in the world. This was a company in chaos, poor worker efficiency, poor product quality, 15,000 workers striking. When changes were mandated, employees brought dummies into the parking lot dressed as managers so they could burn them in effigy.

O’Neill succeeded not by ordering change or changing earnings targets. He focused on one thing that affected the organization from head to toe. He had found a Keystone habit. A Keystone habit is one that, if changed, fundamentally changes many others around it. His idea was that each plant was to attain zero injuries. He went into union negotiation telling workers that the only thing he wouldn’t bargain was commitment to safety. This put the union into a unique position as they had always been complaining about safety; managers couldn’t argue against safe operation either. The bottom line was not just demanding everybody start being safe but that in order to ensure safe operation the entire manufacturing process was studied and revamped and workers educated about quality control and efficient work processes. By doing this, Alcoa became the most efficient aluminum company on earth.

Focusing on Keystone habits works also with individuals. If you start exercising even once a week it spills over into other areas such as smoking cessation, better eating habits, even higher productivity at work. Families eating dinner together, same thing – children have higher grades, more confidence. Making your bed in the morning is correlated with higher productivity, greater sense of well-being and budgeting skills. Small wins are part of the way that Keystone habits are so effective – a steady application of a small advantage. Take small moments of success and combine them and they build into an entire change of habit.

Eating and exercise habits of obese people were changed overnight when the US National Institute of Health published a study where a group of obese people were asked to keep food

diaries, writing down everything they ate for a week. When they did that, keeping the journal became a Keystone habit and became a planning tool for people to create healthful meal plans.

Often the best time to make deep change is when a crisis emerges. The old habits are now known to be untenable. This can happen in terms of social injustice. For example, Rosa Parks was the spark that changed an entire nation's view of civil rights. This black woman, who refused to change her seat on the bus for a white man, was actually well-known and respected throughout black and white communities. When the incident hit the news, people who barely knew her or knew of her rallied to her support, refused to ride the buses, crippling the firm and allowed Martin Luther King to rise up and rally black people to support changes that had been in the works since the Civil War 100 years before.

By the use of small groups that are essentially autonomous, Rick Warren started a church that encompasses 20 thousand people who get together to discuss how they will follow the precepts of "The Purpose-Driven Life." These groups meet in each other's homes and discuss the bible. He established a set of curriculums to teach new habits to them. They sign a covenant and the responsibility for their spiritual growth is devolved upon themselves. It is now a self-perpetuating process just like Rosa Parks and Civil Rights.

Angie Bachmann, out of boredom and to escape issues with family interactions, started going to the casino, and her habit grew to the point where she ended up losing a \$1 million inheritance. The cycle was a craving for numbness. Difficulty at home was the cue; she would go play at the casino and her reward was the occasional high of winning. When Harrah's casinos sued her for failing to make good on a \$375,000 promissory note she couldn't pay, she countersued, claiming that the casino had preyed on someone they knew had no control over her habits.

The main message of Duhigg's book is summed up in the following quotation: "To modify a habit you have to decide to change it. You must consciously accept the hard work of identifying the cues and rewards that drive the habits' routines, and find alternatives. You must know you have control and be self-conscious enough to use it." In my own case, I did not make a conscious decision; instead, a combination of events, some external, forced me to stop drinking and change my life. My own life does not fit the patterns explained in Duhigg's book, but reading the book took my understanding of how to change habit to a new level.

To utilize the ideas in the book: consider these four stages:

- Identify the Routine
- Experiment With Rewards
- Isolate the Cue
- Have a Plan

Larry Earnhart, Alchemy Business Consulting, 2013