

# **7 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT BEHAVIORAL CHANGE**

## **1. Why should I bother to explore the science of behavior change?**

Anyone with a little life experience knows that the process of change is complex. Sometimes you'll hear or read something that inspires you and you'll think: I've got to try this. But when you're confronted with your plan a year later, you will often realize that you didn't get very far at all.

Habitual behavior plays a key role in many change processes. Most of us are aware of the fact that if we display different behavior on one occasion, this usually won't be enough to achieve permanent improvements. To really change, we have to aim at creating new habits that we can maintain. But that's exactly what's so complex!

Behavioral research shows that even developing very simple, new habits that you've chosen yourself – such as eating fruit at lunchtime or performing a few physical exercises before breakfast – will on average take more than two months before they become a habit. And more complex behavior will take even longer.

## **2. What is it that makes changing our behavior so difficult?**

Behavior is the weak link when it comes to change. The first key obstacle: there are two kinds of processes at work in our brain that conflict with each other. On the one hand, we make conscious plans. But on the other hand, our brain is primarily focused on repeating behavior that has worked in the past and that doesn't cost too much energy: habitual behavior. Psychologists say:

our brain is striving for ‘cognitive ease’: it unconsciously and automatically focuses on achieving what’s necessary with a minimum of effort.

A second key obstacle to behavior change is the strong tendency we have of avoiding pain, discomfort and loss. In many cases, this limits our motivation to learn and to experiment, as well as many other forms of change. “Making mistakes is OK” is something you often hear at a management conference for example. But deep in our brain there’s a primeval, anxious voice that warns us: “Making mistakes is just wrong. Don’t do it!”

The third key obstacle to behavior change is the physical and social environments we find ourselves in. A few examples: if people around us nod their heads in a friendly manner, we continue talking for longer; if we are given a bigger meal or a larger plate, we will eat more. Very few people realize how much influence their direct environment has on them. And in an environment that remains the same, they will still try to adopt new behavior.

### **3. What is The Ladder?**

The Ladder is a simple model designed to structure insights and tips for behavior change. Imagine a ladder with three steps...

The top step is the goal you’re chasing. In other words: the result or development you want to see. An example: In my work, I want to experience less stress and more pleasure.

The middle step is the behavior that’s required to get you closer to that goal. Behavior formulated in clear and concrete terms. An example: I start each working day by switching off my email and telephone and then working for half an hour on what I think is most important.

The bottom step is the support you need to get you to actually execute your intended behavior. These are techniques that will help your new behavior kick in and stay put. For example, I write my intention on a note, and put it on my desk as a reminder. Additionally, every day I use my phone to keep track of whether I managed to stick to my intention.

#### **4. Setting goals: what's the best way to do this?**

Almost every successful entrepreneur today had to radically adapt the plan they first started out with. Entrepreneurship isn't a question of making a plan and scoring. It's more a question of making a plan, trying it out, making mistakes, learning a lot, and then hopefully scoring.

This is a crucial insight. And not just for novice entrepreneurs. For all forms of change and innovation, it's essential to realize that almost everything revolves around learning. Formulate the goal you're aiming for as much as possible in terms of personal development and not in terms of the performance you want to achieve.

In other words, not: "At the end of this year I want an 80% score for my performance review" but: "In the coming six months, I will try out at least three ways to improve my management style."

When it comes to changes, development goals are usually more effective than performance goals. They help you, for example, to experience the mistakes you make on your journey as learning rather than failing, as a step forward rather than a step back.

## **5. Choosing behavior: what do you have to watch for?**

If we see someone achieving an important goal, we often think: Wow, what an amazing persistence! However, research shows us something different. The true reason that people persist in specific behavior is often due to the fact that they enjoy performing the behavior itself.

Ayelet Fishbach and Kaitlin Woolley are two experts in the field of motivation. They conducted research into people who were focused on healthy food, exercise and studying.

The people who ultimately persevered with healthy living and who spent a lot of time on their studies turned out not to be the people who attached most importance to their development. They were the people who simply enjoyed the activity itself.

Fun works. The instant pleasure experience from what we're doing is crucial for achieving our goals.

If there are several behaviors that can help you achieve your goal, the advice is simple: choose the behavior you enjoy the most. Sticking with it will cost you the least effort.

## **6. Arranging support: what works?**

If you want to change behavior, the first thing you have to ask yourself is whether you can change something in your direct environment so that the desired behavior becomes easier. Behavioral scientists make a distinction between the physical and social environments in which we function.

A couple of examples of how you can make use of this physical environment: If you want to eat less candy, make sure you don't have any candy or snacks

in the home. Or keep them somewhere or in such a way that you really have to make an effort to get to them.

Do you want more quiet time in your schedule? Reserve some blocks of time on your calendar several weeks in advance so that you can carry on working undisturbed.

You can also make use of your social environment. If you want to get colleagues to discuss important decisions more often, put them as close together as physically possible. Even in this age of emailing and texting, distance is the most powerful predictor of mutual contact.

And if you want to become a better manager, set up a peer coaching group with a few colleagues. Have breakfast together every Monday and exchange ideas and experiences.

## **7. How to use The Ladder in practice**

Work with The Ladder as follows: First plan your change “from top to bottom”. You specify your goal, translate that into behavior, and choose your method of support.

And then you just get on with it. You try it out “from bottom to top” to see if it works. You make sure your support techniques are in place, then you try out your new, desired behavior, and work towards your goal. Along the way, you see how things go and adapt if necessary.

What you’re actually doing is making use of behavior research twice. When you plan, you make use of all kinds of evidence-based insights. And when you try things out, you do your own research: you analyze the situation and assess whether what you have thought up actually works.

What you're doing, in fact, is continually going through the "empirical cycle". You've got an idea about how you're going to approach a change, you make a start on it, and you see if it works.

Change is a learning process. It's not about proving that your plan works. It's about finding an approach that works for you and that brings you closer to your goal. That's the key.