

CHANGING HABITS – THE 3 Ps (Part 2)

Richard Searle www.searleburke.com r.searle@mbs.edu

Persistence is important to changing habits but if persistence was enough to ensure that we would persist at leadership changes, there would be no need for this article. Unfortunately it is not, and so there is!

At the end of each of our senior leadership programs we encourage managers to let go of any habitual ways of thinking, acting and being which don't work so well for them and to cultivate new leadership habits which work better. But as we examined in Part 1 of this article that is easier said than done.

Martin Seligman argues that optimists are a lot happier and more successful at work and in life than pessimists, but that many of us are pessimists. He includes himself in that number and I reckon that I would include myself too.

Seligman claims that we pessimists have a particular self-defeating explanatory style especially when it comes to setbacks and unpleasant events at work and in our lives. He argues that in our explanations we take things Personally, and we consider our shortcomings to be Permanent and Pervasive. The school calls us about our child playing truant for the day and we tell ourselves, "I am an irresponsible parent". We get laid off from the company where we have been employed for twenty years and we tell people, "I can never hold down a good job". These explanations not only make us miserable but they also induce passivity.

Seligman's 3Ps operate as a vicious cycle. I have been thinking about some different Ps of my own for how we can develop a virtuous cycle in creating new habits. My first P is perhaps the most surprising because I call it Peace of Mind; my second P is Persistence and third P is Patience.

Let's start with Persistence because in many ways it is the most obvious. It takes action and will power to create a new habit. It usually requires work and discipline, and practice and experimentation and new routines. Significant change usually requires sustained momentum, and it often helps to have some

way of measuring that momentum and that progress. Sometimes it takes years. Malcolm Gladwell argues that it takes 10,000 hours of practice to become masterful in most fields. Gandhi's non-violent non-cooperation may have contributed to Britain's exit from India, but it wasn't quick!

For many years I have had an ambition to play the saxophone. I bought the instrument, had some lessons, and I would practice in bursts and especially on weekends and during holidays. I made no progress. I continually needed to relearn what I had already learnt. I would become frustrated and disenchanted playing boring little tunes. Being a pessimist, I would mock myself for ever embarking on such a ridiculous folly. My new teacher asked me to promise him that I would play for fifteen minutes each day – what a paltry amount. Even when I don't feel like it, I can manage fifteen minutes most days. An interesting thing has happened. I have started to make progress and I can hear and see the progress. I am playing much more interesting Blues tunes. I am starting to enjoy the practices more. I usually practice for longer than fifteen minutes, but I don't feel guilty when I don't. I now can actually see myself playing the saxophone well one day, and I find that an exciting prospect.

Patience is a great companion to Persistence. By patience I also mean compassion and kindness and acknowledgement and appreciation. Our own harsh judgements can be our greatest enemy in creating new and beneficial habits. Patience is not the same as making limp excuses for not acting – ironically, an environment of appreciation allows us to be far more rigorous and “impatient” with ourselves and others when we do not honour our aspirations and commitments. How to create a whole environment or organizational culture like this will be the topic for a future article.

At the end of our senior leadership programs we invite managers to write a letter to themselves and we send it to them a few months later. Many of these senior and very successful managers will not open their letters for days and weeks after they receive them. They are concerned that they have not lived up to their own promises and commitments, and they do not want to deal with their own harsh and even vitriolic criticisms. I believe that many of us find our own criticisms of ourselves far more debilitating than any external judgements. My advice is to treat each change project as a new opportunity to learn how to be kinder and gentler with ourselves and others!

And hence we arrive at the start, which is Peace of Mind. The kind of leadership changes which we are envisaging in this article often require us to change the way we think, to change our ways of being, and even to change who we are being. We are talking about something considerably more profound than mere behavioural change or action. We are talking about what lies behind successful behavioural change and action. What matters here is the source of our action as well as the action itself. The practice of mindfulness can be very valuable in helping us to clarify and choose the source of our action.

We are most powerful at changing habits when our commitments are sourced in our fundamental freedom and aligned with some core purpose that we see for ourselves in the world, and when we are present to this. Sometimes our leadership initiatives start out this way but they mutate over time and they become an instrument for projecting or protecting our identity and ego. When this happens we can start to treat ourselves and others as things that need to be forced and moulded and even manipulated to meet our change objectives. We start to measure and judge ourselves and others too. This is a recipe for dissatisfaction and disillusionment with our commitments, even if we succeed at times in cranking out an acceptable outcome. The secret here is to find a reliable way to embark on changes with a peaceful mind, and to choose changes which enhance our peace of mind.

Leaders are able to mobilize others to change because they are well versed themselves in what it takes to create new habits.