You can teach an old dog new tricks or....
Making it a habit to live the 7 Habits

The Eighth Habit:
Making It Stick

By Leo M. Tonkin

Why are the most successful selling books and tapes the "how to" ones? How come the most attended seminars are those that promise to give us answers that will instantly change every area of our lives for the better? What is it about us human beings that so attracts us to the easy answers, quick solutions and the short cuts?

All around us we are inundated--fast food, overnight delivery, faxes, microwaves, instant lottery and now the new and improved Information Superhighway. We're constantly trying to lose weight faster, stop smoking sooner, tan quicker under the "machine"--we all want it now, instant gratification. And if that's not enough, we want more, better and different.

The quick solutions, easy answers and short cuts are insufficient for effective change.

We complain that our children are not getting the education they deserve. It's no wonder. They're not taught to "think" and "apply their thinking." In fact, the most influential item that determines the acceptance of a student getting into a good university is their college entrance exam scores--the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SATs). The SATs are judged, scored and evaluated not on how well one thinks or how creative one is, but rather on how many right answers one gets in a specific amount of time.

Then we hope that somehow we'll find a job, a career, a profession that will bring out our creativity, our potential...our passions. But to our surprise (or not), we find situations that call for uniformity, conformity and adherence. "That's the way we do things around here..", "You can't

do that, it's never been done before..." "Here, let me show you the right way to do that...".

We often find ourselves in a dilemma between wanting to really excel and go beyond the call of duty but, we are many times confronted with the negative consequences of succeeding. In a team environment you are usually concerned about what the others will think, competitiveness, taking credit, etc. Often times what is present is a low trust level and a scarcity mentality, a "either" vs. "or" perspective---"us/them", "me/you."

But wait...here come the memos, meetings, trainers, the human resource staff...the answers are coming...our problems will get fixed. They tell us about "cultural change", "paradigms", "continuous improvement", "benchmarking", "re-engineering."
It's great information, a new language is established, a new vision statement, we all have more knowledge.

Now what? The memos get filed..the workbooks get shelved...we speak the same terminology...our vision statement is framed on the wall? Hopefully, it made a difference.

This is a common scenario in many organizations, small to large, throughout a diverse range of industries. The question has always been--"How do you make it stick? How can you get it integrated? How

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do you really know if it's working?"-- Regardless if the "it" refers to training, change, new information or knowledge.

How do you integrate training, information and knowledge into useful, effective practices?

How do you translate information into useful, practical applications? How can you transfer a body of knowledge into the very fabric and foundation of your actions, behaviors and attitudes? How does something become second nature? How do habits become habits? For those who want the quick, easy answer---there isn't one.

There is a tremendous distinction between "doing" something and "being" something. One could dance by counting the steps and going through the motions as opposed to "letting it flow." You could deliver your lines on cue in contrast to becoming part of the character. Or you can paint by the numbers.

By following the instructions, remembering the formula, and using the techniques, one can learn how to do something. But is that really what we are after? Initially, probably yes. However, significant fundamental changes only occur when one transforms the "doing" into "being."

This only happens as a process. There are no simple solutions, right answers or how to's. And the process can be different for each individual or organization. There are, however, basic principles that are common to the process that require further understanding.

The first principle is to understand the very nature of a process. A process is theoretically characterized by generally moving in a spiraling, upward direction, towards a particular goal or objective. The process of mastering a particular new skill, habit or activity happens in relatively brief spurts of progress. Each spurt is followed by a slight decline to a plateau higher than that preceded it.

In actuality, in almost all human endeavors of performance--sports, arts, business--progress is often less regular, the spurts vary, the plateaus may have their own peaks and valleys along the way.

To take the process of mastery, one has to train regularly, practice diligently and receive proper "coaching" and feedback to attain new levels of performance and effectiveness. But while doing so--and this is the inevitable fact--one has to be willing to spend more time on the plateau and keep practicing even when it seems no progress is being made. This is the key to achieving excellence, mastering new training, and developing powerful, productive habits.

Today's competitive marketplace can be viewed as a prodigious conspiracy against this process. We're continually bombarded with promises of instant success, and fast, temporary relief, all of which lead in exactly the wrong direction.

So we begin to look for other paths.

Once such path belongs to what I call the Rookie. The Rookie approaches each new venture, opportunity or relationship with tremendous enthusiasm. He or she loves getting involved with planning, designing, creating--the new beginnings. They come out of the starting blocks highly motivated and when they achieve their first spurt, they become even more excited and overjoyed.

The falloff from the first peak, however, comes as a shock. The inevitable plateau that follows is unacceptable. Enthusiasm and motivation quickly dissipates. The "juice' runs out. Practice is avoided and rationalizations begin to set in--"This really isn't the right thing....it's boring, risky, costly, time-consuming..." whatever. The Rookie quickly tries something else, hoping to get different results.

Converse to the Rookie is the MVP. This is a competitive individual who doesn't settle for second best. All that seems to matter are results, no matter what. The MVP starts out by making robust progress. The first spurt goes as expected, but, when he finds the plateau, he simply won't accept it. He redoubles his effort, pushes himself harder, takes short cuts for quicker results.

Many corporate managers fit this profile. They strive for results at almost any cost. Somehow, in whatever he or she is doing, the MVP manages for a while to keep making brief spurts of upward progress, followed by sharp declines. When the fall occurs, the MVP is likely to get hurt. And so are friends, colleagues, stockholders and other relationships.

The Hobbyist has a different attitude. After becoming familiar and adapting to the situation, he or she is willing to stay on the plateau indefinitely. The Hobbyist doesn't mind skipping stages essential to the development of mastery. He's the one who doesn't bother going to professional meetings, training seminars and other performance enhancers. He usually does only enough to get by.

The categories above are not quite this neat and simple. You can be a Rookie at one thing and a MVP with another and so on. The same categories can also describe organizations in general as well as various aspects of an organization. The sales team may resemble the Hobbyist while management is the MVP. The marketing department could be a Rookie while production is just beginning the path to mastery.

When a powerful perspective of the process is adapted, training people, initiating change, and confronting challenges and opportunities are viewed differently. This brings us to the next basic principle--training.

Unfortunately most organizations' attitude towards training and development is from the paradigm that something is not working and needs fixing. Inherit to this perception is often the feeling that "..something is wrong...we're not good enough...something's missing..." Generally a mood of being invalidated and threatened. Training is many times viewed from the point that "...it will provide something we don't now have, and when we get it, the training is complete." Thus, training is seen as an outcome-based curriculum rather than a process.

Most training is viewed as an outcome based activity, rather than a process.

Imagine an athlete, dancer or an actor saying that they were already trained. If you were going to compete in the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta, when would your training end? It wouldn't. You often hear people say that they're "...in training." There is a big distinction between "being in training" and "being trained." The first is an ongoing process, the latter an end result.

It's important to have goals, milestones and measurements for training. However, when training is seen as an element of a process, there is less resistance to change and a greater impact can result from the training. The Japanese have an expression for it, Kaizen. It means gradual, unending improvement, doing 'little things' better; setting--and achieving--ever higher standards.

Related to the onset of training comes the anxiety related to shifting the status quo. This alludes to the next principle of change. Human beings intrinsically resist change. Change, like training, often challenges our comfort levels, creates a fear of the unknown, and provokes

a threat to our sense of being in control. Change makes the familiar, unfamiliar. And in the face of change, the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable--we strive, and sometimes fight, for familiar ground. Change is usually unpredictable and occurs spontaneously--other characteristics which are not easily welcomed. We generally have a low tolerance for not knowing, for not understanding--especially in a society where we are groomed to have the right answers, or at least appear that we do.

Change, in and of itself, is not an issue, but one's reaction to change can affect performance.

The good news about change is that it puts everyone back to ground zero. There is a unifying principle to change that pulls people together, a commonality that builds strength and support in teams and organizations. When systems, procedures and processes change, it's usually not the change that causes upsets, breakdowns or problems, but one's reaction to the change. By developing the habit of proactivity and shifting the process of change from adversity to being a welcomed factor along the process of mastery, great strides in performance and effectiveness can be accomplished.

When one is going through personal growth and development and is working on changing one's actions and behaviors, the immediate environment of people surrounding you will still, by default, interact with you from their usual perspective of you. They will interact with you based on their familiar experiences and will continue to relate to you from the "box" and "label" they have of you. You have to consciously focus on shifting other peoples perspectives of you. This usually takes patience, persistence and emphatic communication.

Referring back to the example of the plateaus, change is required to move from one level to the next. Change is inevitable. Change is only change because it is different. The way things currently are, exist because of change. The status quo is change that has become common and familiar--the next plateau along the path.

Practice is a principle that determines the velocity of transcending the "doing" into "being"; of integrating new skills, knowledge and information into applied daily habits. Practice requires persistence, patience, repetition and rigor. It doesn't work by osmosis. People are not just born with certain abilities. Abilities, like skills and habits, are learned and developed over time. As stated earlier, the challenge usually becomes the greatest when the practicing seems to provide little or no immediate results. This is the attraction and pull towards the "here and now" thinking, the instant gratification. The tendency is to quit, try something different or assume that the new skill or ability has been mastered. People tend to look for shortcuts and the quick and easy road to accomplishing the objectives.

The greatest challenge occurs when practicing produces little or no immediate results.

To help illustrate this point, let's look at a rare species of a particular bamboo tree grown in China. From the initial planting of the seed to full grown maturity takes approximately 5 years. The tree requires daily nurturing and watering throughout this period. Yet, no growth or progress is seen until the fifth year. During the first 4 years of nurturing and watering, the tree doesn't even break through the ground's surface.

In the fifth year the tree blossoms 30 to 40 feet in a very short period of time.

An onlooker to the process and progress of the tree's growth may become judgmental, critical and impatient. Especially if the onlooker doesn't know beforehand that it takes 5 years for growth. The farmer, on the other hand, knows it would take 5 years, and continues along the path providing what is necessary to accomplish the objective.

A critical factor to practice is having realistic expectations and milestones for measuring progress. Another key element is establishing a system and routine that, when followed, will produce the desired outcomes. To think one could become a black belt in Karate in a few months would seem silly. Common knowledge asserts that it takes approximately 3-5 or more years of ongoing, daily practice and instruction. And to think that Karate just involves using your hands and feet to either block, kick, punch or get out of the way takes years of rigorous practice is generally accepted. Why is it that we often think that using something similar to our hands and feet, like our speaking and listening, could be mastered in a significantly shorter period of time?

One cannot approach practice from just a linear perspective, i.e., for every one input a specific output will result. The principle of practice is somewhat exponential, where each input builds on another. If the process becomes hindered in any way, too much ground could be lost. You cannot necessarily start where you've left off. Persistence and scheduled routines are the key for translating new skills, learning and processes into effective habits.

But what if you don't know what it's going to take to accomplish the objective? How do you know if the system and routine are on track? How do you know if you're headed in the right direction? The answer is the next crucial principle of feedback.

In every organization, it's crucial that results are being measured, regardless if the measurements are qualitative or quantitative. Organizations must have systems in place for reflecting accurate measures for all critical success factors of an organization, be it productivity, performance, financial, service or quality.

Most organizations do track and measure results. Usually these results show what the outcomes are....the end results: profit and loss statements, sales figures, market share, production output, absenteeism, billable time, et al. What if the results measured are below or exceed the desired outcomes? Would you know, based on the feedback system, what contributed to the results being below or above the expectations? Would you know what actions to take if the results are off?

There's a big difference between measuring results and the actions that produce the results.

When evaluating results, a distinction should be made between measuring end results and the actions that produced the results. To give effective feedback, one needs effective measurements.

If your goal is to lose weight, the end result is the loss of pounds. The actions that produce the lost pounds could be any number of things: caloric intake, aerobic exercise, meal preparation, supplements, etc. Without knowing what actions impact the results, how does one know what to focus on? By focusing on the actions, the results will get accomplished, if not, the actions need to be altered.

Other factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the feedback

system include clarity of expectations before and during the project or task, and being specific. Often, managers and staff assume they are in sync, relating to the same information and understanding, when in fact they're not. Having clearly defined goals specified, along with mutually agreed upon milestones, contributes to the overall effectiveness of one's performance. It is equally important that the feedback is coming from the appropriate personnel in an environment of partnership and support. Feedback provided by the wrong people at the wrong time, damages trust in relationships and ultimately in one's performance.

Additionally, various elements should be determined regarding the particulars of the feedback system. Evaluate if the time period of the measurement works or not--daily, weekly, monthly quarterly, etc. Determine if the unit(s) of measure gives the proper perspective one needs for evaluation, i.e., gross sales, net sales, number of clients, comparisons, etc. Often times it may be useful to have multiple units of measure. It is also important to design and display visual charts that best capture and represent the status of the what is being measured. And finally, keep the measurements accurate and up-to-date.

The final principle that develops habits is action. Too much time is spent on setting up the right circumstances, creating the right situations or waiting for the right information to begin. The key is start where you're at and progress from there. Procrastination, urgent rather than important matters, and needless interruptions frequently occur and stifle one's progress. One needs to schedule priorities rather than prioritize schedules. By establishing training activities, feedback sessions, and implementation strategies as priorities and scheduling them into a weekly routine-- skills, abilities and processes will become habits.

You need to schedule priorities rather than prioritize schedules

Directly correlated to action is time. Action only occurs in time. So it's critical that one create an action plan and a schedule to implement and integrate the process or objectives at hand. In the face of a plan and schedule, one can best manage change and chaos. By being prepared and knowing one's status, one can be clear about where he or she is, where he or she is going, and what next actions are necessary to get there. Interruptions, distractions and time-wasters occur because of a lack of a plan and schedule.

Upon shifting one's perspective of change and growth, one can design innovative plans to integrate new training into daily and weekly practices. By creating a clearly defined action plan with specific milestones to measure, and a powerful relationship towards feedback, new habits are established and new levels of performance are realized.

When you begin to examine and uncover the existing paradigms within an organization and discover the foundational processes that have been counterproductive, ineffective and costly, then, and only then can short and long term shifts take place. When an organization frees the self-imposed constraints and limits of its people, and challenges themselves to see in new ways, then real insights and discoveries will take place that allow for extraordinary achievement.

Individuals that are genuinely encouraged to learn, to innovate, to risk, and to participate-- become authentically engaged towards accomplishing the goals, objectives and mission of the organization.

When people commit to the process of mastery...when organizations provide training, the support to implement and integrate new knowledge and information, as well as supportive resources and feedback.... peak performance and optimal effectiveness can be achieved.

This point comes especially hard to those who think of the corporate world as a game of having the right answers, taking the short cuts and being in control. Organizations must be willing to question the notion that the organizational processes and systems that have brought success in the past are the only way. By shifting perspectives of change, growth and development, organizations will find the strength and flexibility to survive in a highly competitive environment.

By the way, you can teach an old dog new tricks. Who said it was going to be easy?