Breaking bad habits

When non-compliance occurs, organisations typically aim to improve policies, procedures and training methods. However, individual habits can often undermine even the most effective compliance arrangements

Sustained habitual change can take time and effort on behalf of an organisation, especially when individuals' behaviours return to an undesirable state

From an early age, we all form and rely on habits to function effectively (and, at times, ineffectively). We frequently form these habits without thinking, after which they become almost impossible to remove on a permanent basis. Given the habitual behaviours of all individuals, it is perhaps not surprising that many organisations struggle to achieve the levels of compliance they require. How, then, can organisations eliminate 'bad' habits and engrain 'good' habits in order to achieve better compliance?

By understanding the four conditions of any habit, compliance arrangements can be realigned and enhanced to support an individual's habit-forming approach

Habitual basics

All habits are formed through the repetition of a particular act or behaviour over a period of time. This time period varies between individuals, but research[1] indicates that some individuals could require almost nine months before a habit becomes automatic. This explains to some extent why breaking a habit (and forming a new one) can be time consuming, difficult and frustrating.

For a habit to form, four specific conditions are required, referred to as 'TAPS' (see further **Box 1**):

- **Trigger** – An event, reminder or cue that will prompt the individual to engage in the habit
- **Appeal** – The desire and attraction associated with undertaking the habit
- **Process** – The activity undertaken in experiencing the habit
- **Satisfaction** – The reward obtained through continuing with the habit.

Once the habit is formed, it will stay with us for life, even when other habits are created, or when the individual believes that the habit has been 'broken'. This explains why some individuals can 'relapse' into bad habits, despite believing that such patterns of behaviour have been replaced.

From a compliance perspective, the existence of 'lifetime' habits can clearly pose a problem. New employees are likely to rely, at least initially, on their own behavioural patterns regardless of whether these 'fit' the new organisation. As a result, attempting to change all four habit conditions (TAPS) simultaneously can lead to resistance and non-compliance.

Achieving habitual change

By understanding the four conditions of any habit, compliance arrangements can be realigned and enhanced to support an individual's habit-forming approach.

Changing the trigger – Our habits start with a trigger, but the opposite is also true – if we *don't* receive a trigger, our habit may not occur. Such triggers are aligned to our senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste) and by engaging multiple senses simultaneously we can create ►

Box 1: Case Study

On a recent consulting and training engagement, I worked alongside the Finance Director in a FTSE-250 company, which highlighted a multitude of compliance problems covering areas including Finance, Safety, HR and Operations. The engagement focused on understanding the existence of habits, desirable or otherwise, across areas of non-compliance.

- **Triggers** – The company followed the majority of 'expected' habit triggers, including communicating policies and procedures, displaying safety signs and delivering training sessions. However, although this information provided a series of effective visual and auditory cues, other sensory triggers were ignored, particularly those involving touch, which accounts for around 40% of individuals' preferred style of learning. To combat this problem, some of the visual aids and cues were either adapted or supplemented by documents and tools that had an 'appeal' if touched (i.e. being soft, glossy, and touch-friendly).
- **Appeal and process** – Some of the organisation's expected processes were unnecessarily lengthy, complex and unattractive to the end user. It was unsurprising, therefore, that compliance was such a problem to the organisation. To make matters worse, several operational teams with significant power appeared to strongly influence the behaviours of others, negating the existing processes and reinforcing a series of old approaches. In addition to simplifying processes and enhancing their appeal as an approach that staff would want to follow, particular focus was applied to the resistant groups. This included the removal of several group 'leaders', together with the introduction of highly influential process 'supporters' to encourage others to 'follow suit'.
- **Satisfaction** – Significant efforts had already been made by the company to reinforce behaviours and hence build habits. However, these rewards had been introduced on a relatively short-term basis and, although initial compliance was observed, behaviours subsequently returned to older methods of working. A series of improvements were identified, including both financial and emotional rewards that were initially focused on immediate gratification. These included personal gains such as peer recognition, financial incentives and the ability to undertake group activities, promoting a sense of belonging. Interestingly, it was the non-personal, altruistic rewards that were identified as a more significant driver to habit change, including charitable donations and community support exercises.

a response. Imagine a fire that we can see, the crackling that can be heard, the heat we feel, and the smell of burning – all sensory triggers that should lead to us taking action … *if* we have formed a habit around responding to danger.

Creating triggers that utilise multiple senses can be helpful in embedding a habit more effectively. In addition, *removing* a trigger can help to remove the habit. However, for habits that are firmly embedded, removing or changing the trigger is unlikely to result in new behaviours, at least in the short-term.

Make it more appealing – One of the reasons why individuals fail to 'let go' of an old habit is the continued level of appeal that exists. This can take several forms, including 'social appeal', which is explained in more detail below.

To combat this problem in the compliance arena, rules and requirements should ideally come across as more desirable than other options available. This is partly linked to the level of 'pain' the individual will experience by creating and following the new habit. By making the old approach appear more uncomfortable and less acceptable socially, individuals are more likely to consider the alternative.

Simplify the process – From a habit-forming perspective, simple and clear processes quickly become automatic as less mental effort is required to follow them. This point is key to achieving compliance, as individuals will generally choose the process that is easier to administer – assuming that they *can*.

Where possible, 'blocking' a particular process (i.e. making it more difficult) is helpful, but the simplicity of the new process remains critical as individuals may seek out other, easier options if the approach is overly-complex.

Increase the reward – The final habit condition is arguably the most important (and most difficult to 'break') given that it 'reinforces' the behaviour and leads to continuation. Unless this aspect is carefully implemented, individuals are likely to abort any new habits in favour of old ones with greater levels of satisfaction.

One of the difficulties here is that the satisfaction derived from undertaking a behaviour will differ from individual to individual. These could be internal psychological or external rewards, covering aspects of a financial, social, or emotional nature.

It is important, therefore, to consider that different rewards can appeal to different individuals. By identifying and eliminating these rewards from undesirable habits it is possible to create a more satisfying habit. Furthermore, individuals are more likely to form habits where there is an immediate (rather than delayed) reward.

Increasing / decreasing resistance

Although managing the four habit conditions in the most beneficial way will support the creation of new habits, other social factors should also be considered.

Group pressure and, in particular, the need to comply is significant when forming or changing a habit. Individuals can respond to group pressure by ignoring new processes, as recognition and acceptance from others (social acceptance) can outweigh organisational compliance.

Conversely, this phenomenon can also be used in positive manner by ensuring that social groups contain supporters of organisational changes, in turn encouraging others to 'join the team'.

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Making the change

Individual habits are key enablers and blockers in the pursuit of achieving compliance. In addition, sustained habitual change can take time and effort on behalf of an organisation, especially when individuals' behaviours return to an undesirable state.

Notwithstanding these points, through focusing on the four habit conditions (Trigger, Appeal, Process, and Satisfaction) and the importance of group pressure, individuals can be encouraged to change habits and behave differently. ●