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Are Bad Habits Holding You Back?

Do you have bad habits that are holding you back in your career? Or, maybe you have employees with bad habits that are holding them back. Perhaps they are obvious habits such as pushing yourself (or others) too hard or procrastinating on projects until a deadline is upon you. Maybe the habits are more subtle ones such as over-relying

on email communication or spending too much time on your electronic devices. There are dozens of bad habits that can undermine job performance and stall career advancement. Numerous books and articles have been written on the subject.

Some bad habits can be changed by willpower or by fear. Many cannot. Most people who ultimately are successful in changing a bad habit do not do so on their first try. Eliminating a bad habit is hard work. Bad habits are powerful because, at some level, they are rewarding. In other words, there are actual benefits to bad habits. The benefits may be short-lived and/or ultimately harmful, but they provide some positive reward in the near term. If we want to change, we must acknowledge these benefits.

ANTECEDENTS AND CONSEQUENCES

However, acknowledging the power of bad habits is not enough to produce lasting change. Bad habits do not occur in a vacuum. They are preceded by specific antecedents and they are followed by specific consequences. Antecedents stimulate bad habits.



Consequences reward bad habits.

For example, let's say that you are overly busy, stretched too thin, don't have time to meet with your team and yet need to give them instructions. In such situations, you use email 80% of the time to communicate with your team. Doing so gives you a feeling of relief and enables you

to relax. Since this approach "works" you keep doing it and a habit of over-relying on email is formed.

To break a bad habit such as this, one must break the association between the antecedent, the bad habit, and the consequence. In this example, the association between not having time to meet in person and over-reliance on email must be broken. Or, on the other side of the scale, the association between excessive email and relief/relaxation needs to be interrupted. Fortunately, there are proven methods for breaking associations like these.

PLATEAUS ARE NATURAL

The process of breaking the association between bad habits, antecedents, and consequences is not usually a continuous line. There can be plateaus or "stopping points" along the way. Plateaus are natural in habit change. They are pauses in progress rather than setbacks or relapses.

In the case of over-reliance on email, let's say that you have been working on breaking the association

between busyness and emailing instructions. You have been meeting in-person or on the phone with your team about 50% of the time for the past month. You still send after-hours email to them, but not on issues that should be handled face-to-face. You would like to get your email instruction rate down to less than 25% of the time. At this point, your progress has paused and you have plateaued.

The good news is that there are proven ways to get back on track after a pause like this one. Even when bad habits are strongly ingrained, if plateaus are managed correctly, backsliding into the bad habit can be avoided.

RELAPSES ARE INEVITABLE

Like it or not, relapse is part and parcel of habit change. Some people relapse several times before a permanent habit change occurs. Relapses into bad habits usually have warning signs and/or triggers. In other words, relapses can be triggered by high-risk situations and/or by heavy-duty temptation.

In our example of over-reliance on email, let's say that there are some especially thorny issues that need to be addressed with your team. People are taking advantage of the freedom you have given them, not enough work is getting done and errors are increasing. You are a conflict avoider. So, you start sending emails to your team about their productivity, accuracy, work ethic, etc. Your email rate shoots up to over 80% again. You have had a setback and have relapsed.

To deal with the relapse, warning signs and triggers must be addressed. High-risk and heavy-duty temptation situations must be controlled in order to avoid re-engaging in the bad habit. Psychologists have developed specific behavioral tools in order to do so. Once triggers are addressed and temptation is controlled, the association between antecedents, bad habit, and consequences can be tackled again.

THE LONGER, THE STRONGER

Bad habits do not have to hold you back. Research shows that the longer you avoid a bad habit, the stronger you get. Time helps to break the relationship between triggers, bad habits and rewards. The less frequent a bad habit occurs, the easier it is to resist. The less frequent a bad habit occurs, the more time there is to substitute a new, good habit.

The first step in controlling a bad habit is to identify it. The second step is to adopt a systematic approach to change the bad habit into a good one. PSP Metrics has designed a systematic approach to habit change. For managers who want to eliminate bad habits, manage plateaus, or overcome relapses, our digital coaching website is the tool of choice. Visit us at www.mybehaviorchange.com and ask your PSP Industrial Psychologist for a demo password.

PSP Metrics is a leading provider of pre-employment screening tools for the manufacturing, consumer products, utility and service industries. We adapt applicant screening tools to the information needs and budget of each customer and provide 24-hour turnaround of test results worldwide. We also design tools for employee retention, management development, and succession planning.