

MAKING CHANGE STICK

WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US ABOUT LASTING BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE

INTRODUCTION

Most of us have had the experience of wanting to change something about how we behave but failing to sustain it. It is not for want of trying, and not because change is impossible, but because the conditions for lasting change are more specific than we typically assume.

This article draws on the neuroscience and psychology of behavioural change to explain what those conditions are and how to create them.

WHY THE BRAIN MAKES CHANGE HARD

A useful starting point when thinking about behaviour change is neuroplasticity, namely the brain's ability to reorganise itself by forming new neural connections. For many years, the prevailing view was that the brain was essentially fixed by early adulthood. Thankfully, we now know that is wrong. The work of neuroscientist Michael Merzenich and others established that the brain continues to change in response to experience well into old age, though it does become somewhat less plastic as we age, which is part of why change takes sustained effort.

When you repeat a behaviour consistently, the neurons that fire together wire together, a principle often attributed to Donald Hebb. The more frequently a pathway is used, the more efficiently it transmits signals. This is how habits form: what starts as a deliberate, effortful action gradually becomes automatic as the neural pathway strengthens.

The corollary is important: the old pathway does not disappear. Think of it like building a new road. Traffic shifts to the new route because it is faster and smoother, but the old road is still there, and under pressure, we can default back to it. This is why progress made in a relatively safe practice environment can seem to evaporate in a genuinely high-stakes situation. It is not failure; it is our wiring.

We don't ever get rid of the old pattern completely — it is a hard-wired neural network. Rather, we develop a new neural pathway and once it is stable and strong, 'traffic' uses the new pathway instead of the old.

HOW LONG DOES IT ACTUALLY TAKE?

You may have heard the popular claim that habits form in twenty-one days. This figure has no credible scientific basis, it appears to originate from a misreading of a 1960 self-help book, and it has been circulating, largely unchallenged, ever since.

The most rigorous study on habit formation to date (conducted by Phillippa Lally and colleagues at University College London) found that the average time to reach 'automaticity' was 66 days, with a wide range from 18 to 254 days depending on the person and the complexity of the behaviour. Not surprisingly, simpler behaviours form faster; more complex ones take considerably longer.

The research also offered a comforting finding: missing a single day did not significantly derail the habit-formation process. What matters is consistency over time, not perfection.

Building a new pattern of behaviour in a specific leadership situation, where the stakes are real, the triggers are unpredictable, and the old pathway is deeply grooved, sits at the more complex end of that spectrum. Twelve weeks is enough time to establish a foundation, although it is rarely enough to make the new pathway truly robust under pressure. This is why what you do after the initial establishment of a new behaviour pattern matters.

THE ROLE OF INTENTION: STARTING WITH THE IDEAL SELF

One of the most consistent findings in behavioural change research is that intention and action are only weakly correlated. We can be entirely sincere in our desire to change and still fail to follow through, not because we lack willpower, but because the kind of intention matters enormously.

Richard Boyatzis, whose Intentional Change Theory draws on decades of research into sustainable behavioural change in leaders, makes a distinction that is worth considering. In his framework, the starting point for lasting change is not a goal or a plan, it is a vivid conception of the ideal self: who you are at your best, what you stand for, how you show up when you are fully yourself. This is not wishful thinking. When the ideal self is sufficiently concrete and emotionally resonant, it becomes a source of intrinsic motivation; a *pull toward* change rather than a *push against* current behaviour.

Boyatzis and his colleagues found that this positive emotional attractor, as they call it, is what distinguishes people who sustain change from those who revert. Crucially, it works because it activates the parasympathetic nervous system (the rest-and-digest state associated with openness, creativity, and hope) rather than the stress response that goal-pressure and self-criticism tend to trigger. Starting with a clear and felt sense of who you are trying to become is not a warm-up exercise; it is the motivational foundation on which everything else is built.

But vision without execution structure remains vulnerable. This is where Peter Gollwitzer's research on implementation intentions becomes the practical complement to Boyatzis' motivational foundation. Rather than simply intending to behave differently, people who specify in advance the when, where, and how of their intended behaviour are significantly more likely to act on it. The formula is simple: "When situation X arises, I will do Y." This is not just goal-setting, it is pre-loading a decision, reducing the cognitive load in the moment when the old pattern is competing for the wheel.

The ideal self provides the why; the implementation intention provides the when and how. Both are necessary; neither is sufficient alone.

WHY WE NEED OTHERS

Perhaps the most robust finding across the behavioural change literature is that lasting change is rarely achieved alone. This is not a reflection of individual weakness, it is a structural feature of how human motivation works.

Boyatzis returns to this point in his own research, identifying what he calls *resonant relationships* as one of the necessary conditions for sustained change. These are not simply supportive relationships; they are characterised by genuine mutual regard, psychological safety, and a quality of positive emotional connection that he and his colleagues link directly to the parasympathetic nervous system's role in enabling openness and growth. In a resonant relationship, people feel safe enough to be honest about where they are struggling, which is precisely the condition that makes change possible. Without it, the social support on offer tends to be well-intentioned but superficial.

Kohlrieser, Goldsworthy and Coombe's work on secure base leadership adds a further dimension. Built on attachment theory, the concept holds that a *secure base* provides a sense of protection, safety, and caring, while also offering a source of inspiration and energy for daring, exploration, risk-taking, and seeking challenge. It is this combination — not safety alone, that enables the kind of courageous experimentation that behavioural change requires. Without feeling that it is safe to try, fail, and return without judgement, people tend toward the experiments they are already confident they can execute, which rarely generates the stretch needed for real change.

Gail Matthews at Dominican University found that people who wrote down their goals, shared them with another person, and sent regular progress updates achieved significantly more than those who simply set goals without sharing them, but Boyatzis would add that the quality of that relationship is not incidental to the result. Accountability works best when it is embedded in genuine connection.

Albert Bandura's foundational work on self-efficacy identifies four sources of confidence: mastery experiences (doing it yourself), vicarious experience (watching someone like you succeed), verbal encouragement from others, and physiological feedback (noticing that you are calmer than you expected). Resonant relationships that also function as a secure base activate at least three of those four simultaneously, which is why the people around us are not just a nice-to-have in the change process, but a structural requirement.

Very few of us can execute lasting significant change on our own. We need scaffolds — support mechanisms that hold us to account and help us maintain momentum when life gets in the way.

There is no single correct scaffold. Some people maintain momentum through a regular commitment with a trusted colleague. Others use calendar blocking, habit-tracking tools, or brief weekly journaling. What the research consistently shows is that the people who sustain change are those who have thought deliberately about their support structures, not those who assume motivation alone will carry them through.

WHEN MOMENTUM DIPS – AND IT WILL

Alan Marlatt's research on relapse prevention introduced a concept that translates well beyond its original clinical context: the abstinence violation effect. When people who are trying to change a behaviour encounter a setback, they often interpret it as evidence that change is impossible and give up. The setback itself is rarely the problem; the interpretation of the setback is.

A regression to old behaviour under pressure is the old road reasserting itself, exactly as the neuroscience would predict. The appropriate response is not self-criticism — it is curiosity. What were the conditions? What triggered the old pattern? What would a slightly different approach look like next time?

Treating setbacks as data rather than verdicts is one of the most practically important disciplines in sustaining change. The review-and-adjust loop (returning to the evidence, refining the approach, and trying again) is not a sign that the process has failed. It is the process.

A FINAL NOTE

When considered together, the research on behavioural change is both demanding and encouraging. Demanding, because it is unambiguous that lasting change requires time, structure, social support, and a willingness to persist through setbacks. Encouraging, because it is equally clear that change is possible, for almost anyone, in almost any area, when those conditions are in place.

The model that connects these findings is not complicated. Start with a vivid sense of who you want to become. Translate that vision into specific, modest experiments. Build resonant relationships and secure bases that outlast your initial motivation. Treat every setback as information. And keep going, because the neuroscience is also clear on this: success, even modest success, genuinely does breed success. Each new capability you build extends what feels possible, and the accumulation of small shifts is how significant change is made.

I hope that this has been helpful. If you would like to explore this idea further or would like support in making important behavioural changes, please feel free to contact me at the email address below.

LKemp@KempStreetPartners.com.au

REFERENCES:

- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84(2), 191–215.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (2006). An overview of intentional change from a complexity perspective. *Journal of Management Development*, 25(7), 607–623.
- Boyatzis, R. E., Rochford, K., & Jack, A. I. (2014). Antagonistic neural networks underlying differentiated leadership roles. *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 8, 114.
- Boyatzis, R. E., & McKee, A. (2005). *Resonant Leadership: Renewing Yourself and Connecting with Others Through Mindfulness, Hope, and Compassion*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Doidge, N. (2007). *The Brain That Changes Itself*. New York: Viking.
- Gollwitzer, P. M. (1999). Implementation intentions: Strong effects of simple plans. *American Psychologist*, 54(7), 493–503.
- Hebb, D. O. (1949). *The Organisation of Behaviour*. New York: Wiley.
- Kohlrieser, G., Goldsworthy, S., & Coombe, D. (2012). *Care to Dare: Unleashing Astonishing Potential Through Secure Base Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lally, P., van Jaarsveld, C. H. M., Potts, H. W. W., & Wardle, J. (2010). How are habits formed: Modelling habit formation in the real world. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 40(6), 998–1009.
- Marlatt, G. A., & Gordon, J. R. (1985). *Relapse Prevention: Maintenance Strategies in the Treatment of Addictive Behaviors*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Matthews, G. (2015). Goal Research Summary. Paper presented at the 9th Annual International Conference of the Psychology Research Unit of Athens Institute for Education and Research, Athens, Greece.
- Merzenich, M. M. (2013). *Soft-Wired: How the New Science of Brain Plasticity Can Change Your Life*. San Francisco: Parnassus Publishing.