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Chapter 1

The Immutable Truths of Behavioral Change

As an executive coach, I’ve been helping successful leaders achieve positive lasting change in behavior for more than thirty-five years. While almost all of my clients embrace the opportunity to change, some are a little reluctant in the beginning. Most are aware of the fact that behavioral change will help them become more effective leaders, partners, and even family members. A few are not.

My process of helping clients is straightforward and consistent. I interview and listen to my clients’ key stakeholders. These stakeholders could be their colleagues, direct reports, or board members. I accumulate a lot of confidential feedback. Then I go over the summary of this feedback with my clients. My clients take ultimate responsibility for the behavioral changes that they want to make. My job is then very simple. I help my clients achieve positive, lasting change in the behavior that they choose as judged by key stakeholders that they choose. If my clients succeed in achieving this
positive change—as judged by their stakeholders—I get paid. If the key stakeholders do not see positive change, I don’t get paid.

Our odds of success improve because I’m with the client every step of the way, telling him or her how to stay on track and not regress to a former self. But that doesn’t diminish the importance of these two immutable truths:

**Truth #1:** Meaningful behavioral change is very hard to do.

It’s hard to initiate behavioral change, even harder to stay the course, hardest of all to make the change stick. I’d go so far as to say that adult behavioral change is the most difficult thing for sentient human beings to accomplish.

If you think I’m overstating its difficulty, answer these questions:

- **What do you want to change in your life?** It could be something major, such as your weight (a big one), your job (big too), or your career (even bigger). It could be something minor, such as changing your hairstyle or checking in with your mother more often or changing the wall color in your living room. It’s not my place to judge what you want to change.

- **How long has this been going on?** For how many months or years have you risen in the morning and told yourself some variation on the phrase, “This is the day I make a change”?

- **How’s that working out?** In other words, can you point
to a specific moment when you decided to change something in your life and you acted on the impulse and it worked out to your satisfaction?

The three questions conform to the three problems we face in introducing change into our lives.

*We can’t admit that we need to change*—either because we’re unaware that a change is desirable, or more likely, we’re aware but have reasoned our way into elaborate excuses that deny our need for change. In the following pages, we’ll examine—and dispense with—the deep-seated beliefs that trigger our resistance to change.

*We do not appreciate inertia’s power over us.* Given the choice, we prefer to do nothing—which is why I suspect our answers to “How long has this been going on?” are couched in terms of years rather than days. Inertia is the reason we never start the process of change. It takes extraordinary effort to *stop* doing something in our comfort zone (because it’s painless or familiar or mildly pleasurable) in order to *start* something difficult that will be good for us in the long run. I cannot supply the required effort in this book. That’s up to you. But through a simple process emphasizing structure and self-monitoring I can provide you with the kick start that triggers and sustains positive change.

*We don’t know how to execute a change.* There’s a difference between motivation and understanding and ability. For example, we may be *motivated* to lose weight but we lack the nutritional *understanding* and cooking *ability* to design and stick with an effective diet. Or flip it over: we have understanding and ability but lack the motivation. One of the central tenets of this book is that our behavior is shaped, both positively
and negatively, by our environment—and that a keen appreciation of our environment can dramatically lift not only our motivation, ability, and understanding of the change process, but also our confidence that we can actually do it.

I vividly recall my first decisive behavioral change as an adult. I was twenty-six years old, married to my first and only wife, Lyda, and pursuing a doctorate in organizational behavior at the University of California, Los Angeles. Since high school I had been a follicly challenged man, but back then I was loath to admit it. Each morning I would spend several minutes in front of the bathroom mirror carefully arranging the wispy blond stands of hair still remaining on the top of my head. I’d smooth the hairs forward from back to front, then curve them to a point in the middle of my forehead, forming a pattern that looked vaguely like a laurel wreath. Then I’d walk out into the world with my ridiculous comb-over, convinced I looked normal like everyone else.

When I visited my barber, I’d give specific instructions on how to cut my hair. One morning I dozed off in the chair, so he trimmed my hair too short, leaving insufficient foliage on the sides to execute my comb-over regimen. I could have panicked and put on a hat for a few weeks, waiting for the strands to grow back. But as I stood in front of the mirror later that day, staring at my reflected image, I said to myself, “Face it, you’re bald. It’s time you accepted it.”

That’s the moment when I decided to shave the few remaining hairs on the top of my head and live my life as a bald man. It wasn’t a complicated decision and it didn’t take great effort to accomplish. A short trim at the barber from then on. But in many ways, it is still the most liberating change
I’ve made as an adult. It made me happy, at peace with my appearance.

I’m not sure what triggered my acceptance of a new way of self-grooming. Perhaps I was horrified at the prospect of starting every day with this routine forever. Or maybe it was the realization that I wasn’t fooling anyone.

The reason doesn’t matter. The real achievement is that I actually decided to change and successfully acted on that decision. That’s not easy to do. I had spent years fretting and fussing with my hair. That’s a long time to continue doing something that I knew, on the spectrum of human folly, fell somewhere between vain and idiotic. And yet I persisted in this foolish behavior for so many years because (a) I couldn’t admit that I was bald, and (b) under the sway of inertia, I found it easier to continue doing my familiar routine than change my ways. The one advantage I had was (c) I knew how to execute the change. Unlike most changes—for example, getting in shape, learning a new language, or becoming a better listener—it didn’t require months of discipline and measuring and following up. Nor did it require the cooperation of others. I just needed to stop giving my barber crazy instructions and let him do his job. If only all our behavioral changes were so uncomplicated.

**Truth #2:** No one can make us change unless we truly want to change.

This should be self-evident. Change has to come from within. It can’t be dictated, demanded, or otherwise forced upon
people. A man or woman who does not wholeheartedly commit to change will never change.

I didn’t absorb this simple truth until my twelfth year in the “change” business. By then I had done intensive one-on-one coaching with more than a hundred executives, nearly all successes but a smattering of failures, too.

As I reviewed my failures, one conclusion leapt out: Some people say they want to change, but they don’t really mean it. I had erred profoundly in client selection. I believed the clients when they said they were committed to changing, but I had not drilled deeper to determine if they were telling the truth.

Not long after this revelation, I was asked to work with Harry, the chief operating officer of a large consulting firm. Harry was a smart, motivated, hardworking deliver-the-numbers alpha male who was also arrogant and overdelighted with himself. He was habitually disrespectful to his direct reports, driving several of them away to work for the competition. This development rattled the CEO, hence the call to me to coach Harry.

Harry talked a good game at first, assuring me that he was eager to get started and get better. I interviewed his colleagues and direct reports, even his wife and teenage children. They all told the same story. Despite his abundant professional qualities, Harry had an overwhelming need to be the smartest person in the room, always proving that he was right, winning every argument. It was exhausting and off-putting. Who could say how many opportunities had vanished because people loathed being pummeled and browbeaten?

As Harry and I reviewed his 360-degree feedback, he claimed to value the opinions of his co-workers and family members. Yet whenever I brought up an area for improve-
ment, Harry would explain point by point how his question-able behavior was actually justified. He’d remind me that he majored in psychology in college and then analyze the behavioral problems of everyone around him, concluding that they needed to change. In a mind-bending display of chutzpah, he asked me for suggestions in helping these people get better.

In my younger days, I would have overlooked Harry’s resistance. Mimicking his arrogance and denial, I would have convinced myself that I could help Harry where lesser mortals would fail. Fortunately I remembered my earlier lesson: Some people say they want to change, but they don’t really mean it. It was dawning on me that Harry was using our work together as another opportunity to display his superiority and to reverse the misperceptions of all the confused people surrounding him, including his wife and kids. By our fourth meeting I gave up the ghost. I told Harry that my coaching wouldn’t be helpful to him and we parted ways. (I felt neither joy nor surprise when I later learned that the firm had fired Harry. Evidently the CEO had concluded that an individual who actively resists help has maxed out professionally and personally.)

I often call up my time with Harry as a stark example that, even when altering our behavior represents all reward and no risk—and clinging to the status quo can cost us our careers and relationships—we resist change.

We’re even defeated by change when it’s a matter of life and death. Consider how hard it is to break a bad habit such as smoking. It’s so daunting that, despite the threat of cancer and widespread social disapproval, two-thirds of smokers who say they’d like to quit never even try. And of those who do try, nine out of ten fail. And of those who eventually quit—
namely the most motivated and disciplined people—on aver-
age they fail six times before succeeding.

Compared to other behavioral changes in our lives, smoking is a relatively simple challenge. After all, it’s a self-
contained behavior. It’s just you and your habit, a lone indi-
vidual dealing with one demon. You either lick it or you don’t. It’s up to you—and only you—to declare victory. No one else gets a say in the matter.

Imagine how much harder it is when you let other people into the process—people whose actions are unpredictable, beyond your control—and their responses can affect your success. It’s the difference between hitting warm-up tennis balls over the net and playing a match where an opponent is rocketing the balls back at you.

That’s what makes adult behavioral change so hard. If you want to be a better partner at home or a better manager at work, you not only have to change your ways, you have to get some buy-in from your partner or co-workers. Everyone around you has to recognize that you’re changing. Relying on other people increases the degree of difficulty exponentially.

Let that last sentence sink in before you turn the page. This is not a book about stopping a bad habit such as smoking cigarettes or dealing with your late-night craving for ice cream. Nicotine and ice cream aren’t the target constituency here. It’s about changing your behavior when you’re among people you respect and love. They are your target audience.

What makes positive, lasting behavioral change so challenging—and causes most of us to give up early in the game—is that we have to do it in our imperfect world, full of triggers that may pull and push us off course.

The good news is that behavioral change does not have to
be complicated. As you absorb the methods in the following pages, do not be lulled into dismissiveness because my advice sounds simple. Achieving meaningful and lasting change may be simple—simpler than we imagine.

But *simple* is far from *easy*. 