ChangeThis | 148.01

A carpenter decided to change careers.

He had two children and his wife was expecting twins. They needed a larger house, and he needed a job that made more money. The boss was reluctant to see him go, but the carpenter was determined. Finally the boss asked if he would build just one more house. The carpenter agreed. And he did build the house. But at this point he was so preoccupied with his future, he just went robotically through the motions and the house wasn't up to his usual standards.

Finally the house was done and the boss came to inspect. As the two stood at the doorway, the boss handed the carpenter the key: "This is my gift to you for all the fine work you've done over the years." The carpenter was in shock. If only he had known this was to be his house, he would have paid better attention to what he was doing.

In many ways, we all live our lives like this carpenter. Scientists tell us that 90 percent of our daily lives are spent in routine. Unconsciously, we follow patterns that have perhaps served us well in the past but are no longer relevant, and the more ingrained these patterns become, the more we struggle to cultivate the new behaviors we need now.

It doesn't have to be that way. Our ability to change is our greatest gift as human beings. It enables us not only to develop new capabilities, but to truly transform into our best selves—wiser and more able to deliver our gifts. Indeed, I would argue after working with over one thousand executives in all kinds of industries around the world, the ability to learn new habits when needed is what sets apart those whose careers flourish from those who plateau.

But change is not easy, is it? We start out with the best of intentions, but all too often those aims get pushed aside. Because I help people change for a living, I've been obsessed for the past dozen years or so with discovering how to make the process easier. I want to change how people change. After a lot of research and practice on myself and others, I've come to see that seven insights from neuroscience and habit formation can help improve the odds of positive change. Whenever I share these principles with my executive clients, they always say, "Why didn't we ever learn this in school?" All I can tell them is that it's never too late to learn how to change.

It's my hope that these ideas will not only help you change how you change, but also how you support growth in those around you, as well.

Change Takes Work, But Practice Makes Permanent

Our brains have enormous "plasticity," meaning they can create new cells and pathways. But our brains also create strong tendencies to do the same thing over and over. Here's why: the brain cells that fire together wire together. Meaning, having run in a certain sequence, they are more likely to run that sequence again until it becomes a habit. It's one of the ways the brain conserves energy. Which means that if you've been doing something a certain way for a while, you've like developed a deeply grooved neural pathway that's keeping you doing what you've always done.

That's why change is hard—you've got to practice enough to create a new pathway that is strong enough to compete with the old one. The process is not about getting rid of the old pathways—the pathways to your current behavior is there for life—but building new ones. Even quitting a bad habit, like procrastinating, for example, is really about creating a good new habit, like planning ahead and starting your work sooner.

From a brain science perspective, you have to consciously practice long enough for the behavior to move from your prefrontal cortex where it requires effort, to your basal ganglia, where it operates unconsciously. To explain what that means, think about learning to drive. At first it was incredibly complicated. You had to think about every move—where to put your hands, your

feet, your eyes, how to maneuver through traffic, back up, parallel park. Now you never have to consider it consciously at all. Driving lives in the habit part of your brain.

This is also why you've got to put external reminders in place at first. Unless you have a trigger from the outside—an email reminder, a dot on your computer—you'll keep defaulting to the old behavior because it's automatic. One of most effective types of triggers I know is something I call a "habit changer"—a short, catchy, one-line mantra to help you persist in your intention. For example, if you're striving to better connect with those you lead, you might repeat to yourself "bringing them along is part of my job." Or if you're struggling with prioritizing your workload or setting boundaries at work, you might use the mantra "You can't say yes if you can't say no." These habit changers can help you rewire your brain to override that automatic system so you can make a more conscious choice.

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You Have to Get the Bunny on Your Side

The other insight from neuroscience is that we have more than one brain involved in change. One is our neocortex, our "thinking brain." That's what we use to decide what change we want to make. But we also have an emotional brain. This is the brain concerned with feelings, instincts, eating, fighting, and sexual behavior. It has two structures that get involved when we try to change anything. The first is the amygdala which is the part of the brain we share with reptiles. Its function is to constantly scan the environment for potential danger. When you decide to change something, it perceives you to be a threat to yourself and turns on the fight or flight mechanism. That's why you end up treating yourself harshly with self talk (fight) or give up (flight) when you make a mistake.

The other part of our emotional brain that gets involved in change is our reward center. It connects the ventral tegmental area (VTA) with the nucleus accumbens. We share it with all mammals and it's as smart as a bunny rabbit or squirrel. It propels us toward pleasure and often sabotages us by overriding what our thinking brain has decided in pursuit of immediate rewards

To succeed at a change, you've got to get the bunny on your side. We create lasting change not through our rational thoughts (It makes sense that I should network more), but by engaging our feelings (It's going to feel fabulous to meet new people.) If the change seems too hard, or

no fun, your bunny brain is going to work against it. And because the bunny doesn't have a long-term memory, you've got to keep the feeling alive every day! One way to do this is through visual reminders that appeal to the pleasure-seeking part of the brain. For instance, I helped someone stop smoking permanently by advising him to put pictures of Hawaiian beaches in his office, car, and home. Why? Because his emotional reason to stop was to live long enough so he could to retire to a beach in Hawaii.

You Can't Get Fit by Watching Others Exercise

It's easy to confuse intention and action. I've had clients who struggle with this. They hire me to help them delegate more effectively, learn better influencing and collaboration skills, create greater emotional intelligence… then proceed to talk to me each session about what they want, why they want it, and why they can't have it.

"Okay," I'll say, "What action are you willing to take this week to bring you closer to your goal? Here are my suggestions." They always agree and then are back next time, not having done anything and ready to talk about it all over again.

I've come to understand that the reason they are stuck is that they see talking to me as doing the work of changing. Our make them feel like they are changing—or at least trying to.

But as the Chinese proverb says, "Talk doesn't cook rice."

The hard reality is that we only bring something new into being in ourselves through action. Reading and talking to others can give us insight and support, can offer valuable reflection on what's working and what's not, but only if we are doing the heavy lifting in the first place. The brain only changes through experiences. You can't create new neural pathways by wishing you were different. Or talking or reading about being different.

To truly change requires three things: desire, intent, and persistence. You have to identify what you desire enough to be willing to stick to, and make your intention actionable through SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound) goals just like you probably do with your team. You can't truly change if you have only the desire and intent without the persistence.

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Don’t Think In Facts, But In Frames

I once heard about a young man who wanted to become a bull rider. The goal in the ring is to stay on the bull for eight seconds. For the first six months, this guy worried constantly: “What if I get thrown right away? What if I get trampled?” And sure enough, he kept getting thrown before the eight seconds were up. Then, one day, he decided that worrying about all that could go wrong, he’d worry about what could go right: “What will I do with the wad of money I’ll make? What about all the fans who’ll want my autograph?” He’s now the United States bull riding champion.

As the bull rider discovered, when we imagine all the things that could go wrong, we generate a lot of internal interference, static in our minds, that increases the likelihood of failure. Our amygdala wants to move away from the possibility of pain, so intentionally or otherwise, we goof up or give up. When, on the other hand, we focus on all the positive outcomes of our intention, our bunny brain is attracted by the possibility of greater pleasure and so it helps us go toward what we want.

Another reason this approach works is because, according to neuroscientists, we don’t think in facts, but in frames. Frames are mindsets that structure how we think. They are stories we tell ourselves about life that get confirmed over and over because we filter out any conflicting

information. Each of us has a frame, a story about ourselves that influences everything we think and do. These tend to keep us stuck—"I never," "I always," "I'm a person who…" But what happens when we create a new frame, like our bull rider did? What if we told ourselves a new, positive story about our future self? Then, making the necessary changes becomes possible, because you've got a new ending to tell.

Recognize Learning Happens in Stages

No matter what you're trying to learn, it happens in three phases. The first is called post hoc, meaning after the fact you recognize that you wanted to do it differently. This is the "I told myself last week I would remember to be patient with my employee" stage, the "I just remembered I was going to check in with my colleague" stage. Believe it or not, learning is happening because now you're aware enough to know you did wrong.

The second is ad hoc, meaning while it's happening, you're aware you want to do it differently. That's where a client of mine is in her anger management learning curve: "As I was about to yell, I thought to myself, walk away, walk away. Then I thought screw it, and let him have it right between the eyes." This is the "I shouldn't buy this cookie (wine, pair of $200 pants) but I'm going

to anyway" stage, the "I should turn off this computer and spend more time with my family but I'm still sitting here" stage. This too, is learning; know it or not you are carving that new pathway.

The third is pre hoc, which means that you've practiced it so much that your behavior is automatic. You know you're doing exactly what it is you want to on a regular basis, with more successes than mistakes.

Unfortunately you've got to pass through stages one and two to get there. It's just how learning happens. And until you get to stage three it can feel like you're making no progress at all because by definition you're exquisitely aware of how and when you're blowing it. Understanding the phases are crucially important to sustaining persistence and effort.

Take my anger management client who was trying to change her tendency to blow up at a particular colleague. She'd been going along doing really well and then lost it one day. When I met with her, she said, "I am a complete failure. It's no use even trying." (That's the amygdala talking.) It turned out that she'd actually kept her cool during the meeting but stormed down the hall afterwards. That's progress! Then I forced her to do the math on how many meetings she'd had with him without blowing up and she discovered that she'd had a 95% success rate!

That's not just progress; it's real change.

Think Like Thomas Edison

People who change think like scientists. Scientists don't beat themselves up for what they discover. They simply observe, track the results, and make fact-based conclusions regarding next actions on the basis of what they discovered. Consider Thomas Edison, the creator of the light bulb and many other 20th century inventions. When someone categorized his 700 attempts at the light bulb as failures, he said, "I have not failed 700 times. I have not failed once. I have succeeded in proving that those 700 ways will not work. When I eliminate all the ways that don't work, I will find the one that will." It took him 1000 tries, but find it he did.

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The experimental approach can work for you too, as long as you take what you're learning as information that will help you do better in the future—"Oh, I thought if I tried exercising in the morning it would be easier to do. But I did it only twice this week. What if I shift to the end of the day? Let's see how I do next week."

And, we need to remember to be concrete about what we want and realistic about what we can reasonably ask ourselves to learn. Here's what an executive client said he wanted to learn in three months: "to be more positive with my people; to be more creative and productive; to take better care of myself." "How about create world peace while you're at it?" I replied. "And what does `more' mean anyway? Even if it were possible to focus on all of this in that time frame, how will you know if you are more of any of these things?"

We often expect too much of ourselves and we often expect to change overnight. When that doesn't happen, we resign ourselves to staying the same, convinced that we are hopeless, weak, or unmotivated, which makes us even more stuck. But when we look at change as an opportunity for experimentation, learning and discovery, it helps us be more patient, persistent, and maybe even enjoy in the process.

Create the Horizon Effect

To increase success, long distance runners are taught to look at how far they've come, not how much they have left to do. Scientists call this the horizon effect. It gives us encouragement—"I've done twice as much as a week ago!" and builds determination—"I've made it this far; I might as well keep going" by tapping into the power of self-appreciation.

Self-appreciation is powerful. It gives the reward system of our brains a hit of dopamine, the feel good hormone that tells the brain: "do more of this." So the next time around, you're more likely to make that same good choice. The bunny works for praise and it doesn't care where it comes from—you or someone else.

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Being grateful for how you've done reminds you that you've succeeded at something you set out to do, even if it's only once. Recognizing your success also gives you the encouragement to try again tomorrow. Because you're aware of what you've done right, you have more confidence that you can do it again. Especially when it's a change that involves a lot of effort over time, it's important to keep appreciating how far you've come. That will give you the energy to keep on.

This appreciative behavior may go strongly against how you were to motivate yourself—or how you tend to motivate others. Many of us try to scare ourselves or others into change and tend to focus on our failings rather than successes. When you fail to acknowledge your successes, however, it's easy for your efforts to become invisible to you. This behavior comes from our amygdala and can be good for getting us started, but has been shown by much research not be a great motivator over the long run. **You have to be going toward something positive and appreciating success in order to create lasting change.**

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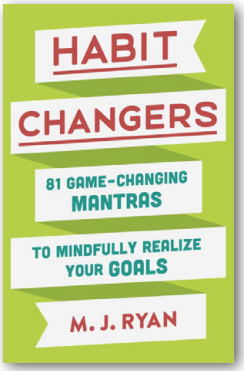

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR | An internationally leading expert on change and human fulfillment, M. J. Ryan works as a senior executive coach to executives, entrepreneurs, and small business owners around the world. Her clients include Time Warner, Facebook, Cisco, Chevron, HP, Microsoft, Frito-Lay, Royal Dutch Shell, and more. She is a partner with Levo, a leading female career network, and is the lead coach at SheEO, a community of 10,000 female entrepreneurs. The former executive editor and founder of Conari Press, she is the creator of the *New York Times* bestselling *Random Acts of Kindness* series and the author of many books, including *This Year I Will...*

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