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Making Change Happen!

Selling is a hard way to make a living! Anyone who has spent more than ten minutes making cold calls or trying to close a deal will quickly agree with this statement. Why are sales and sales management so hard? Sales people spend their days swimming upstream against one of the strongest currents in human nature—the resistance to change. At a fundamental level, we are in the business of effecting behavioral change. We have to convince our prospects to change how they promote their business, we have to talk our advertisers into expanding their programs and managers have to convince their teams to drop counterproductive behaviors in favor of adopting more effective ways of doing things. Perhaps the hardest and most important change we have to make is to alter our own habits, beliefs and behaviors so that we can grow as individuals.

Changing human behavior is analogous to making a change in a computer program, but infinitely more complex. Computer software contains thousands of lines of code and changing even one word or symbol may impact how everything works. Reprogramming the “software” inside our heads works the same way. Our ability to change our behavior is a function of our conscious and unconscious minds and is impacted by all the experiences we’ve had in our life and all the beliefs that we’ve picked up along the way. Every change requires a potentially dangerous leap into the unknown. Given the inherent difficulty of changing the way we do things, it is a wonder that our ancestors ever swung down from the trees and decided to walk around on just two feet. In spite of its difficulty, we must embrace change if we are to grow in our personal and professional lives. Marshall Goldsmith’s new book *Triggers*, offers a powerful set of tools to help its readers make positive changes in their lives. Goldsmith is one of America’s most respected executive coaches and has worked with the leaders of some of the world’s largest companies.

The book’s title, *Triggers*, refers to environmental cues that cause us to behave in a particular way. Goldsmith defines it in this way, “*A behavioral trigger is a stimulus that impacts our behavior.*” These stimuli can be quite subtle, yet they can have a major impact on our mood and on our actions. Goldsmith cites a study which asked people to rank how happy they were on a scale from one to ten. The study found that weather had a significant effect on their answers, with many more people reporting that they were feeling happy on sunny days as compared to cloudy ones. Most of the respondents were completely unaware of the impact of the weather on their moods. He notes that triggers can be external, like a cloudy day, or internal, such as a memory tucked away in our subconscious. They can also be encouraging, listening to upbeat music, or discouraging, spending time with complaining coworkers. Like Pavlov’s dogs, our response to triggers is hardwired into our brains. Fortunately, unlike the good doctor’s canines, we can use our intellect to control our reaction to our environment.

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Marshall Goldsmith's research has found that the key to managing our response to behavioral triggers is to be aware of them. This means we must continually ask ourselves, "Why did I choose this course of action, what was it that led me to behave in this way?" These questions will help us to identify the "antecedents" to our actions. Paying close attention to what led us to act in a particular way or what brings our mood down empowers us to take charge of our behavior and our mood. Once we are aware of our personal "triggers", we can avoid negative stimuli, avoiding the office "Debbie-downer," and expose ourselves to productive ones, listening to motivational speakers or our favorite music on the way to a big call.

Even when we cannot avoid or eliminate counter-productive triggers, being aware of them diminishes their power over us. In animals, and for many people, the response to environmental stimuli is simple:

Trigger—Behavior—Consequence

Once we are aware of the stimuli which cause us to act in a particular way, we can switch off the "auto-pilot" and let our rational mind take over the controls. By doing this, the simple cause and effect sequence is interrupted and looks more like this:

Trigger—Awareness—Choice—Desired Outcome

This process is what separates us from Pavlov's Schnauzers and gives us control over our actions. Heightened awareness of our triggers allows us to read our environment, anticipate potential pitfalls and take appropriate preventative actions making us far more productive. It is simply a matter of stopping and thinking before we act.

Goldsmith realizes that taking conscious control of our actions is not an easy task. He notes that human beings are, "*superior planners and inferior doers.*" Our environments are dynamic, ever changing and filled with surprises. He likes to ask his students this question, "When has your day ever worked out note for note as you planned it?" Of course, the answer to this question is invariably "NEVER!" We need to remain flexible and aware of how unexpected events impact our decisions. Goldsmith talks about "*Ego Depletion*" and "*Decision Fatigue.*" These are both symptoms of living a hectic modern life. Ego depletion is the wearing down of our resolve as we fight temptation over a long day. It is a result of physical exhaustion and constantly having to deal with unexpected obstacles as they arise throughout the day. Decision fatigue describes our tendency to either make careless decisions or decide "not to decide" when we are tired. In *Triggers*, he cites an analysis of a parole board's decisions through the course of the day. Prisoners were far more likely to be paroled early in the day, while inmates with similar records, but who stood before the board later in the day, were likely to continue serving their sentences. This is a good argument for calling on prospects early in the day.

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To protect ourselves from overtaxing our brains by trying to make too many changes at the same time, we should take a thoughtful triage approach to behavioral change. We should take a realistic look at our behaviors and place them in one of the four following categories:

Create—Essentially imagining “a new improved self.” To adopt a new behavior, we must develop a clear vision of the person we wish to become—without this vision we risk slipping into inertia.

Preserve—Maintaining and building on what we are doing right. If we behave properly in some situations, we need to build on this foundation so that we consistently do the right thing.

Eliminate—This involves eliminating counter-productive behaviors from our repertoire. This includes those which we enjoy doing, such as micromanaging our employees. In *Triggers*, Goldsmith makes a clear distinction between self-control and self-discipline. Self-control is the ability to stop ourselves from engaging in counter-productive behaviors (i.e. Not eating a donut) while self-discipline is the willingness to engage in productive behaviors (i.e. Exercising Regularly). Of the two, self-control is the most difficult to master.

Accept—Accepting the reality of your situation, a person who only golfs a few times a year will never become Bubba Watson. Trying to become a pro golfer is unrealistic, but improving the game and learning to enjoy it more is a reasonable goal. In a business context, a manager who has tried repeatedly to improve a rep’s skills may have to accept that the rep is just not suited to selling advertising.

Goldsmith has created what he terms an AIWATT question, one should ask oneself before embarking on any program of change. AIWATT is short for, “*Am I willing at this time to make the investment to make a positive difference on this topic?*” This is a powerful sentence that covers all the bases for committing to personal change: “*Am I willing* (I am taking responsibility for my behavior) *at this time* (now, not sometime in the future) *to make the investment* (I am willing to do the work) *to make a positive difference* (I know why I want this) *on this topic* (I have a clear goal in mind)?” I suggest asking yourself this question each time you set a new goal for yourself and writing it out in statement form (I am willing starting now to invest 3 hours a week to improving my understanding of search engine marketing) and placing it on your desk and/or your dashboard.

Perhaps the most powerful technique Marshall Goldsmith shared in *Triggers* was the practice of “daily questions.” These are questions which address your key goals at the end of the day. Instead of asking yourself, “Did I reach my goal of seeing 20 prospects today?” you ask yourself, “Did I do my best to see 20 prospects today?” The phrasing of, “did I do my best today,” has a

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subtle but important impact on your behavior. Goldsmith deems these “active questions.” Active questions don’t ask about your success or failure on reaching your objective, but address the amount of effort you put toward achieving them. This format is based on his understanding of the incremental nature of changes in human behavior. Change does not happen in a day or a week, change is the result of daily effort toward achieving your goal. Writing down each of your core goals in this format, “*Did I do my best today to...*” and answering them each night keeps you focused on moving toward your goals. Even better, have someone else ask them to you at the end of each day adds an element of accountability to the pursuit of your goals. Goldsmith actually pays an employee to call him every evening to ask him his personal goal questions as he understands how tempting it is to let them drop by the wayside when you have a busy day.

When I read about active questions, I thought if I was a rep I would exchange “questions” with a trusted colleague and do this exercise at the close of our work day. If I were leading a sales team, I would sit with my people and build a list of questions for each of them and a set for me. At the end of the day, I would speak with each of them for 5 minutes or so to discuss their questions. I would give each of my people one of my questions for them to ask me. Using this process would be a powerful way to constantly improve my skills and the skills of everyone on my team.

Someone once said, “The only person who likes change is a baby with a wet diaper!”, but change is necessary if we are to grow as business professionals and as individuals. For anyone who is willing to embrace change in themselves and in their teams, Marshall Goldsmith’s *Triggers* provides some powerful tools to overcome the many barriers that lie between the “You” you are today and the “You” you want to be in the future.

This article was written by Jim Busch.

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