CHAPTER THREE

We're Creatures of Habit

Will and discipline are wildly overrated. That's why we struggle so hard to make changes that last. Even when the need for change is obvious and our intentions are strong we often fall short. Consider:

- Ninety-five percent of those who lose weight on a diet regain it, and a significant percentage gain back more than they originally lost.
- Even after a heart attack, only one of every seven patients makes any enduring changes around eating or exercise.
- Twenty-five percent of people abandon their New Year's resolutions after one week. Sixty percent do so within six months. The average person makes the same New Year's resolution ten separate times without success.
- Seventy percent of organizational change initiatives ultimately fail.

Despite the vast evidence that our efforts rarely yield good results, we keep right on trying to fix what's wrong in our lives, in other people's lives, and in organizations. It is possible to make change that lasts but it depends less on using our conscious minds and more on coopting the more primitive part of our brain in which habits are formed.

No one has demonstrated the limits of willpower more cleverly and convincingly than Roy Baumeister, who has spent much of his career studying self-control. In 1998, Baumeister and his colleagues did a study in which they invited subjects into a room on the pretext that they were going to participate in a taste perception test. The subjects had been deprived of food for several hours, so they were hungry. As

they sat down, the researchers brought in a large plate of fragrant chocolate chip cookies, fresh out of the oven, along with a plate of radishes. Half of the subjects were invited to eat at least two or three cookies but no radishes. The other half was asked to eat two or three radishes but no cookies. The researchers then left the room. None of the subjects, it turned out, violated the rules, although several radish eaters did stare longingly at the cookies.

After five minutes, the researchers returned. This time, they asked each of the subjects to complete a puzzle, which had been rigged so it was impossible to complete. What the researchers really wanted to know was how long the subjects would persist at the challenge before giving up. As it turned out, the chocolate chip cookie eaters hung in for an average of nineteen minutes, compared to just over eight minutes for the radish eaters. The explanation, Baumeister theorized, was that the radish eaters had burned down their reservoir of willpower resisting the chocolate chip cookies and therefore had less energy available to persist on the puzzle.

"Acts of choice," Baumeister and his colleagues concluded, "draw on the same limited resource used for self-control." In short, we each have one reservoir of will and discipline, and it is depleted by *ány* act of conscious self-regulation—whether that's resisting a cookie, solving a puzzle, or doing anything else that requires effort. "The implication," Baumeister writes, "is that many widely different forms of self-control draw on a common resource, or self-control strength, which is quite limited and hence can be depleted readily."

This finding helps explain why diets so consistently fail. In another series of experiments, dieters who were offered appealing foods proved much more likely to break their diets than those who were not exposed to similar temptation. Dieting effectively creates a continuous demand for self-control. Not surprisingly, people on diets perform worse than nondieters on tasks that require focus and vigilance.

A series of studies has demonstrated that uncontrollable stress of any kind—for example, frustration when trying to deal with a government bureaucracy—leads to breakdowns in other areas in which individuals have been trying to exercise control, such as dieting or smoking. In a similar way, not eating for extended periods, getting too little sleep, or feeling distracted by noise that we can't control

each diminishes our self-regulatory reserves. In turn, we become less effective at any given task we undertake.

Self-control, Baumeister hypothesized, operates the same way a muscle does during resistance training. Exposed to continuous stress, the muscle becomes progressively depleted of strength, until ultimately it can't exert any more energy and fails. If we have to rely on willpower to sustain a new behavior, the overwhelming likelihood is that we'll eventually fail.

Contained in this insight is a hint at its solution. If self-control does indeed operate like a muscle, then repeated exposure to stress, followed by sufficient recovery, may subsequently lead to greater strength. That's precisely what happened with the best violinists in Ericsson's study. During their practice sessions, they subjected themselves to intense demand, but never for more than ninety minutes at a time, at which point they rested. They didn't become capable of practicing for longer, but they did get better at practicing for finite periods of time at the highest levels of focus. As a consequence, they became progressively better musicians, just as if you regularly lift weights, offset by periods of recovery, you systematically gain strength.

But if conscious will and discipline are rarely sufficient to make enduring change, why were the top violinists able to persist in their practice with an intensity and regularity that their less skilled counterparts did not? The answer is that they didn't rely solely on willpower. Rather, they were carried along by the largely invisible pull of the routines they built over time.

THE UNBEARABLE AUTOMATICITY OF BEING

For better and for worse, we are deeply creatures of habit. Fully 95 percent of our behavior occurs out of habit, either unconsciously or in reaction to external demands. We're run by the automatic processes of the primitive parts of our brain far more than we rely on the complex conscious capacities of our prefrontal cortex. In short, we think we're in charge of our lives, but often we're not.

It is our evolutionary heritage, for example, to move toward pleasure and away from pain. "Human beings," explains historian John Gray, "are an animal species much like any other, more inventive and

destructive, no doubt, but like other animals in using their resources to survive and reproduce." For thousands of years avoiding pain *was* critical to staying alive in a world full of dangerous predators. Rather than reflecting on our future, we reacted to our needs in the present. When we came across food, we ate as much of it as possible, not least because it wasn't clear when we'd find food again. Storing it in our bodies for potential later use was a survival behavior, and it still is for animals. For most human beings today, it's just a prescription for gaining weight. Even so, the instinct to keep eating after we're full remains powerfully encoded. "We have to be mistrustful of our brains," argues former FDA commissioner David Kessler. "We have to recognize they are the vehicle to invite us to do things that at some point in our evolutionary past may have been very useful, but have gotten completely out of control."

In a similar way, tolerating discomfort in the short term to reap a richer reward in the future requires overriding our powerful and primitive instinct to seek immediate gratification. This challenge shows up in our lives every day, in nearly every way: the temptation for indulgence when it comes to food, alcohol, and sex; the avoidance of regular exercise; our Pavlovian response to the beep of an incoming e-mail rather than maintaining our focus on a challenging task; and the tendency to default to impatience, irritation, and even anger as a way to mobilize others to action.

The irony is that our efforts at self-control fail in large part because we overrely on our prefrontal cortex, where our highest cognitive capacities reside. We're often better served by replacing our negative habits, formed in the more primitive parts of our brain, with positive rituals—highly specific behaviors that become automatic over time. The more these behaviors are repeated and routinized, the more they recur without conscious effort and the less energy they require. The less conscious willpower we have to expend to make things happen, the more effective we become.

In 1911, the mathematician Alfred North Whitehead brilliantly intuited what scientific research would begin to confirm nearly a century later:

> It is a profoundly erroneous truism . . . that we should cultivate the habit of thinking of what we are doing. The precise opposite is the case. Civili-

zation advances by extending the number of important operations, which we can perform without thinking about them.

Every great performer we've encountered—musicians, heart surgeons, dancers, FBI agents, athletes, and leaders—instinctively understands the power of making key behaviors automatic. This is especially valuable under pressure, when fear tends to undermine performance if our skills aren't deeply ritualized. Self-consciousness interferes with the ability to perform any complex task. "To pay attention to their own internal processes—to how they are executing their performance—is often disruptive to highly skilled people," explains Baumeister. "The increased conscious attention merely interferes with the automatic quality of the well-learned response." If you play golf or tennis, for example, you're well aware that thinking about your swing during play only makes you more awkward in your execution.

Much of what we think of as spontaneous behavior actually contains a significant degree of what's called automaticity. "Even when engaged in creative processes, such as writing papers, speaking spontaneously or driving to novel destinations, the component acts and movements are routinized responses," explain psychologists Irving Kirsch and Steven Jay Lynn. "Their automaticity is evidenced by the speed and fluidity with which they are produced. There simply is not enough time for a conscious decision prior to the initiation of each component response." Or, as psychologist and philosopher William James put it, "Consciousness deserts all processes where it can no longer be of use."

John Bargh, one of the leading researchers into the phenomenon of automaticity, takes this insight a step further. "Most moment-to-moment psychological life must occur through nonconscious means if it is to occur at all," he writes in his cheekily titled paper "The Unbearable Automaticity of Being." In Bargh's view, we are best served by using our limited capacity for conscious self-regulation highly selectively on tasks that require complex thinking and creativity. Similarly, Ericsson argues that one of the values of building expertise in basic skills is to release "cognitive resources for other, higher, functions." Think about a great jazz musician. The capacity for improvisation emerges only from a deep, rich foundation in basic musical skills that have long since become automatic and unconscious.

BITE OFF ONLY WHAT YOU CAN CHEW

The first key to building rituals is undertaking no more than one or two at a time. Given the limits of our willpower, the reason is obvious. It makes more sense to invest our limited willpower in creating one ritual that endures than to diffuse it across several new behaviors, increasing the likelihood that all of them will fail.

In most cases, it also makes sense to start small and build on success incrementally. If you've been almost completely sedentary, for example, you're more likely to be successful building a ritual around walking for fifteen minutes three days a week than you are trying to jog three miles a day five days a week. Success also tends to be self-reinforcing. If you stick with a ritual to walk three days a week, it's only a small leap to add another day to the regimen, and then two and three, and ultimately to begin jogging rather than walking.

Conventional wisdom suggests that it requires between twenty-one and thirty days to lock in a new behavior. We've found no credible research to support this assertion. Our own experience is that the time it takes to establish a ritual is highly variable and depends on the complexity of the new behavior, the level of motivation, and the frequency with which you practice it. Embedding a ritual can take anywhere from a couple of weeks to several months. Even then, it's possible to build several rituals over the course of a year, one at a time.

PRECISION AND SPECIFICITY

The second and perhaps most important key to building rituals is precision and specificity. Automaticity researchers have discovered the power of something they call "implementation intentions." In one study, a group of students was asked to write a report over the holidays describing what they had done on Christmas Eve. Half the group was asked to specify exactly when and where they'd do their writing; the other half weren't given any specific instructions. Only one-third

of the latter group completed the assigned task. More than three-quarters of those who defined exactly when and where they'd write the report completed it. In another study, chronic procrastinators who set a specific time to complete a task were eight times as likely to follow through.

In a third study, a group of subjects was asked to exercise at least once for twenty minutes during the next week. That hardly seems like a daunting challenge, but based on the request itself, only 29 percent complied. A second group was given the same challenge, along with detailed information about the significant role exercise plays in reducing the risk of heart disease, an attempt to further motivate them. Compliance rose modestly, to 39 percent. A third group was asked to commit to exercising at a specific time, on a specific day, at a designated location. For this group, compliance more than doubled to an extraordinary 91 percent.

By defining precisely when we're going to undertake a behavior, we reduce the amount of energy we have to expend to get it done. Often, when we make a commitment to a new behavior such as exercising, we fail to recognize that unless we set aside a specific time to do it, it's unlikely we will. In part, that's because there is another behavior we're more accustomed to doing, at the time or because there is something easier and more pleasurable we could do. Whenever we have to think about whether or not to do an activity, in the face of other temptations and potential distractions, we deplete our limited reservoir of will and discipline. If you have to consciously think for very long about doing something, it's unlikely you'll end up doing it for very long.

Exercise is a good example. Ask people who work out at a regular time on specific days whether they use a great deal of willpower to get to it, and the answer will almost always be no. The best evidence that a ritual has taken hold is the feeling of being pulled to it rather than having to push yourself to get it done. "On the days I miss my workout, I feel terrible," clients often tell us.

The more challenging the ritual—physically, mentally, or emotionally—the greater the need to be precise in implementing it. Robert, a senior leader at Sony Europe, created a ritual in which he set aside an hour once a week to think creatively and strategically. The demands

at work were so intense that in the absence o fritual he didn't get around to a part of his job he considered important and which fueled significant value.

At first Robert wasn't exacting about the time for his new ritual. If it got to the appointed hour for brainstorming and he had a quick phone call to make or an e-mail to write, he did those first. Before too long, the starting time he had established for his ritual began to slip, until one day he found himself coming up with an excuse for skipping it altogether. "I really don't have enough time left today to make it worthwhile," he told himself, "so I'm going to put it off." That's when he recognized something wasn't working. The seduction of attending to the urgent, along with the pull of his old habits, was overpowering him.

The solution, we helped Robert to see, was to give himself no leeway in the start time for his ritual. If a call or a conversation in his office began to run late, he took to telling the person "Look, I'm really sorry, but I have another appointment. We'll have to continue this later." Over time, he began setting expectations with others. When he got involved in something that had the potential to interfere with his brainstorming ritual, he made it explicit to his colleagues that he had a hard stop time to meet his next obligation. Once he established a time, he noticed that the business somehow always got done—a kind of reverse Parkinson's Law. Work not only expands to fill the time allotted to it, but also contracts to fit within the time allotted to it.

Inspired by his experience setting precise boundaries, Robert eventually created a second ritual. He reduced the length of most meetings he called from an hour to thirty minutes, and he also let participants know that all his meetings would start and end right on time. "The results were amazing," Robert told us. "Wasted time vanished. We got right to it. People loved knowing they wouldn't be kept waiting when they arrived or held late at the end. We've gotten more focused, and we get far more done at our meetings, in half the time."

WHAT WE RESIST PERSISTS

The third key to building rituals is to focus on something we do rather than something we continually try to resist doing. A diet, for

example, works far better when you choose in advance exactly what you're going to eat rather than simply resisting tempting foods all day long. The power of a ritual is partly the fact that it's a clearly defined, affirmative act. Baumeister's chocolate chip cookie study showed that trying to resist a behavior rapidly depletes our limited reserves of willpower. "It is probably easier and more effective to avoid temptation," Baumeister says, "than to resist it."

Many of our clients buy healthy snacks, put them into their desk drawers, and eat them at designated times, so they don't find themselves feeling hungry when they encounter food in the office or walk by a vending machine filled with sugary and salty snacks. "It matters whether we can shield an ongoing goal pursuit from distractions," explains psychologist Peter Gollwitzer, who has studied the power of implementation intentions. "Predeciding should help a person protect goal pursuit from tempting distractions, bad habits, or competing goals." Or, as David Besio, a professor and researcher at UCSF, puts it, "When you go into a day that's unplanned, then you're just faced with whatever hits you. If you have a plan, then you don't let the unplanned things get in your way."

The same principle applies to other, more complex behaviors. Imagine, for example, that your goal is to be more patient with others and not to interrupt them. If you simply define that as an intention—something you *won't* do anymore—it will almost certainly give way eventually to your established habit of doing exactly what you always did in the past. Instead, a positive ritual might be to take a deep breath each time you notice yourself about to interrupt a colleague. That gives you an alternative behavior, which can become automatic over time. It's sometimes referred to as "If, then" behavior, as in 'When situation *X* arises, I will choose response *Y*.' By creating that intention, Gollwitzer concludes, "people can strategically switch from conscious and effortful control . . . to being automatically controlled by situational cues."

WHAT DO YOU WANT, AND WHAT WILL YOU DO TO AVOID GETTING IT?

The fourth and perhaps most paradoxical key to building rituals is to expect resistance to them to arise along the way. The developmental psychologist William Perry put it wryly: "When someone comes to me for help," he said, "I listen very hard and ask myself, 'What does this person really want—and what will they do to keep from getting it?' " Homeostasis, derived from the Greek word for "standing still," allows us, biologically, to maintain a stable internal environment despite challenges ranging from viruses to changes in temperature. Our automatic internal processes make this possible, but they also help explain why we resist change.

We derive a sense of safety from doing what we've always done, even if it's suboptimal and even if it has the potential to damage us in the long run. Smoking, overeating, micromanaging, and constantly checking e-mail can all serve as ways to diminish feelings of anxiety. In the short term, these behaviors provide a source of comfort and relief. If they're helping to get us through our days and nights, we don't give them up easily, even when we recognize rationally that they're costly and dysfunctional in the long run.

Harvard's Robert Kegan and his colleague Lisa Lahey, influenced in part by their mentor William Perry, have done pioneering work in defining something they call "immunity to change." Working with both individuals and organizations, they've demonstrated how even the most passionate commitment to a given change is invariably counterbalanced by an equally powerful but often unseen commitment *not* to change. "What is the commitment we make, often unconsciously," they ask, "to maintain the status quo and keep the very thing we say we want to happen from happening—because we are afraid of the consequences if it does happen?"

Imagine, for example, that you feel forever distracted and hurried in your life, a complaint we hear so commonly in the workplace that it seems nearly universal. Your primary commitment is to invest more time focused single-mindedly on your most important priorities. The next step, say Kegan and Lahey, is to ask yourself what you're cur-

rently doing (or not doing) to undermine that commitment. The answers might include constantly checking your e-mail; trying to do several activities at the same time; interrupting people in the middle of sentences; and not deciding in advance which tasks on your plate are likely to generate the greatest value.

The third step is to ask, "What is my competing commitment here?" The answers in this case might include "Feeling on top of things," "Being in control," "Getting a lot of things done," and even, perhaps, "Avoiding really difficult work for as long as I can." The final step is defining something that Kegan and Lahey call the "Big Assumption" behind each competing commitment. By that they mean the fear of what might happen if you actually followed through on your primary commitment and changed your behavior. In this instance, the big assumptions might range from "I'll be overwhelmed by all the tasks that will pile up when I'm not paying attention to them" to "People will make decisions without consulting me" to "I won't be there for my clients" to "I won't be able to stay focused, and I'll feel like a failure."

Because we mostly fail to recognize the fears that are inevitably associated with change, we often end up unconsciously sabotaging our own efforts to change. Bringing our competing commitments to light gives us a chance to assess whether the fears we have around a specific change are truly realistic. Often, they're not. For that reason, we next encourage our clients to ask themselves a simple question: "How can I design this ritual so I enjoy its intended benefits but also minimize the costs I fear it will prompt?"

A CULTURE THAT COOPERATES

The next key to successfully establishing rituals is to enlist the support of others. When you make a commitment to someone else to change a specific behavior, it creates a higher level of accountability. Success rates go up dramatically when we pair our clients with a partner—or even better, create a group of three or four—and ask them to check in with one another once a week to report on how they're doing. It's not just that most of us feel a desire to live up to our public

commitments but also that others can help us see how we're getting in our own way. It's also positively reinforcing to be recognized by others for what we've accomplished.

When we first began doing this work, we focused mostly on helping individuals make changes. We paid very little attention to organizations. The consequence was that clients enthusiastically built new rituals, only to return to the workplace and discover that their bosses—and the cultures they worked in—often resisted their intended changes. Perhaps no new behavior is more challenging to organizations, for example, than rituals focused on renewal. Powerful as the evidence is that intermittent renewal drives increased productivity (see chapter 6), the "more, bigger, faster" paradigm is deeply ingrained in most corporate cultures. So is the notion that any downtime is wasted time. Today, we work with senior leaders to develop organizational practices that support the work we're doing at the individual level, including promoting regular renewal during the workday. People can succeed at building rituals regardless of what's going on around them, but broad culture change depends on buy-in from the top.

"The leader must be more than a mere supporter," Kegan and Lahey have written about their work with organizations, echoing our own experience. "We cannot succeed if the leader is only authorizing our participation, if he or she is merely a sponsor of work being led by outsiders. We rely on the leaders we work with to be genuine partners, and when the resistance mounts, as it nearly always does, it is the leader . . . who must help the group renew its commitment to the journey."

KEEPING IT FRESH

The final key to building effective rituals is not to let them become so automatic that you lose track of whether they're still serving your intended goals. That requires a delicate dance between awareness and automaticity, another set of entailed opposites. Without ongoing self-awareness, the risk is that rituals eventually grow stale and become obsolete. Honest self-observation is the antidote to unwitting self-deception. Building new rituals can transform our behavior, but our

instinctive resistance to change, our appetite for instant gratification, and our capacity to kid ourselves will never disappear. Inevitably, we lose our way and fall back at times. So long as we're willing to intermittently shine a light on ourselves and hold ourselves accountable when we fall short—we each have the power to keep learning and growing.

CHAPTER THREE ACTION STEPS

- Reflect on a time when you have successfully made a change in your life or adopted a new behavior. What made doing so possible? Now think about a change you've tried but failed to make. What was the difference between success and failure?
- Identify a new behavior that you would like to build into your life. On what days and at what times could you engage in it? We know that people are exponentially more successful making changes when they undertake them at precise, scheduled times. What would you have to change in order to open up that time?
- When you think about launching a new behavior, what is most likely to get in the way of your success in adopting it? What might you have to give up? What do you fear will get in your way? Given the potential obstacles, what could you do to increase your chances of success?