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Motivation Is Overrated; Environment Often Matters More

ANNE THORNDIKE, A primary care physician at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, had a crazy idea. She believed she could improve the eating habits of thousands of hospital staff and visitors without changing their willpower or motivation in the slightest way. In fact, she didn't plan on talking to them at all.

Thorndike and her colleagues designed a six-month study to alter the "choice architecture" of the hospital cafeteria. They started by changing how drinks were arranged in the room. Originally, the refrigerators located next to the cash registers in the cafeteria were filled with only soda. The researchers added water as an option to each one. Additionally, they placed baskets of bottled water next to the food stations throughout the room. Soda was still in the primary refrigerators, but water was now available at *all* drink locations.

Over the next three months, the number of soda sales at the hospital dropped by 11.4 percent. Meanwhile, sales of bottled water increased by 25.8 percent. They made similar adjustments—and saw similar results—with the food in the cafeteria. Nobody had said a word to anyone eating there.

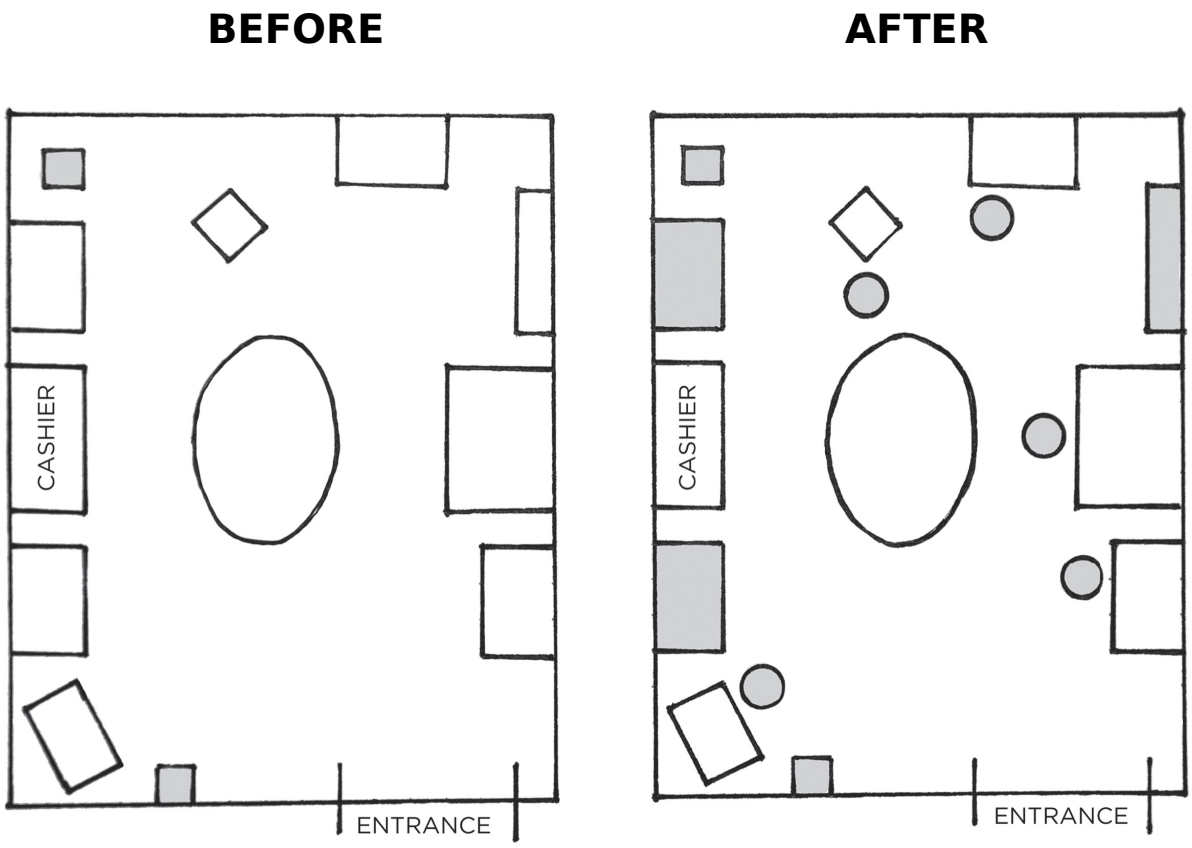

FIGURE 8: Here is a representation of what the cafeteria looked like before the environment design changes were made (left) and after (right). The shaded boxes indicate areas where bottled water was available in each instance. Because the amount of water in the environment was increased, behavior shifted naturally and without additional motivation.

People often choose products not because of *what* they are, but because of *where* they are. If I walk into the kitchen and see a plate of cookies on the counter, I'll pick up half a dozen and start eating, even if I hadn't been thinking about them beforehand and didn't necessarily feel hungry. If the communal table at the office is always filled with doughnuts and bagels, it's going to be hard not to grab one every now and then. Your habits change depending on the room you are in and the cues in front of you.

Environment is the invisible hand that shapes human behavior. Despite our unique personalities, certain behaviors tend to arise again and again under certain environmental conditions. In church, people tend to talk in whispers. On a dark street, people act wary and guarded. In this way, the most common form of change is not internal, but external: we are changed by the world around us. Every habit is context dependent.

In 1936, psychologist Kurt Lewin wrote a simple equation that makes a powerful statement: Behavior is a function of the Person in their Environment, or B = f(P,E).

It didn't take long for Lewin's Equation to be tested in business. In 1952, the economist Hawkins Stern described a phenomenon he called *Suggestion Impulse Buying*, which "is triggered when a shopper sees a product for the first time and visualizes a need for it." In other words, customers will occasionally buy products not because they *want* them but because of how they are *presented* to them.

For example, items at eye level tend to be purchased more than those down near the floor. For this reason, you'll find expensive brand names featured in easy-to-reach locations on store shelves because they drive the most profit, while cheaper alternatives are tucked away in harder-to-reach spots. The same goes for end caps, which are the units at the end of aisles. End caps are moneymaking machines for retailers because they are obvious locations that encounter a lot of foot traffic. For example, 45 percent of Coca-Cola sales come specifically from end-of-the-aisle racks.

The more obviously available a product or service is, the more likely you are to try it. People drink Bud Light because it is in every bar and visit Starbucks because it is on every corner. We like to think that we are in control. If we choose water over soda, we assume it is because we wanted to do so. The truth, however, is that many of the

actions we take each day are shaped not by purposeful drive and choice but by the most obvious option.

Every living being has its own methods for sensing and understanding the world. Eagles have remarkable long-distance vision. Snakes can smell by “tasting the air” with their highly sensitive tongues. Sharks can detect small amounts of electricity and vibrations in the water caused by nearby fish. Even bacteria have chemoreceptors—tiny sensory cells that allow them to detect toxic chemicals in their environment.

In humans, perception is directed by the sensory nervous system. We perceive the world through sight, sound, smell, touch, and taste. But we also have other ways of sensing stimuli. Some are conscious, but many are nonconscious. For instance, you can “notice” when the temperature drops before a storm, or when the pain in your gut rises during a stomachache, or when you fall off balance while walking on rocky ground. Receptors in your body pick up on a wide range of internal stimuli, such as the amount of salt in your blood or the need to drink when thirsty.

The most powerful of all human sensory abilities, however, is vision. The human body has about eleven million sensory receptors. Approximately ten million of those are dedicated to sight. Some experts estimate that half of the brain’s resources are used on vision. Given that we are more dependent on vision than on any other sense, it should come as no surprise that visual cues are the greatest catalyst of our behavior. For this reason, a small change in what you *see* can lead to a big shift in what you *do*. As a result, you can imagine how important it is to live and work in environments that are filled with productive cues and devoid of unproductive ones.

Thankfully, there is good news in this respect. You don’t have to be the victim of your environment. You can also be the architect of it.

HOW TO DESIGN YOUR ENVIRONMENT FOR SUCCESS

During the energy crisis and oil embargo of the 1970s, Dutch researchers began to pay close attention to the country's energy usage. In one suburb near Amsterdam, they found that some homeowners used 30 percent less energy than their neighbors—despite the homes being of similar size and getting electricity for the same price.

It turned out the houses in this neighborhood were nearly identical except for one feature: the location of the electrical meter. Some had one in the basement. Others had the electrical meter upstairs in the main hallway. As you may guess, the homes with the meters located in the main hallway used less electricity. When their energy use was obvious and easy to track, people changed their behavior.

Every habit is initiated by a cue, and we are more likely to notice cues that stand out. Unfortunately, the environments where we live and work often make it easy *not* to do certain actions because there is no obvious cue to trigger the behavior. It's easy *not* to practice the guitar when it's tucked away in the closet. It's easy *not* to read a book when the bookshelf is in the corner of the guest room. It's easy *not* to take your vitamins when they are out of sight in the pantry. When the cues that spark a habit are subtle or hidden, they are easy to ignore.

By comparison, creating obvious visual cues can draw your attention toward a desired habit. In the early 1990s, the cleaning staff at Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam installed a small sticker that looked like a fly near the center of each urinal. Apparently, when men stepped up to the urinals, they aimed for what they thought was a bug. The stickers improved their aim and significantly reduced "spillage" around the urinals. Further analysis determined that the stickers cut bathroom cleaning costs by 8 percent per year.

I've experienced the power of obvious cues in my own life. I used to buy apples from the store, put them in the crisper in the bottom of the refrigerator, and forget all about them. By the time I remembered, the apples would have gone bad. I never saw them, so I never ate them.

Eventually, I took my own advice and redesigned my environment. I bought a large display bowl and placed it in the middle of the kitchen counter. The next time I bought apples, that was where they went—out in the open where I could see them. Almost like magic, I began eating a few apples each day simply because they were obvious rather than out of sight.

Here are a few ways you can redesign your environment and make the cues for your preferred habits more obvious:

- If you want to remember to take your medication each night, put your pill bottle directly next to the faucet on the bathroom counter.
- If you want to practice guitar more frequently, place your guitar stand in the middle of the living room.
- If you want to remember to send more thank-you notes, keep a stack of stationery on your desk.
- If you want to drink more water, fill up a few water bottles each morning and place them in common locations around the house.

If you want to make a habit a big part of your life, make the cue a big part of your environment. The most persistent behaviors usually have multiple cues. Consider how many different ways a smoker could be prompted to pull out a cigarette: driving in the car, seeing a friend smoke, feeling stressed at work, and so on.

The same strategy can be employed for good habits. By sprinkling triggers throughout your surroundings, you increase the odds that you'll think about your habit

throughout the day. Make sure the best choice is the most obvious one. Making a better decision is easy and natural when the cues for good habits are right in front of you.

Environment design is powerful not only because it influences how we engage with the world but also because we rarely do it. Most people live in a world others have created for them. But you can alter the spaces where you live and work to increase your exposure to positive cues and reduce your exposure to negative ones. Environment design allows you to take back control and become the architect of your life. Be the designer of your world and not merely the consumer of it.

THE CONTEXT IS THE CUE

The cues that trigger a habit can start out very specific, but over time your habits become associated not with a single trigger but with the entire *context* surrounding the behavior.

For example, many people drink more in social situations than they would ever drink alone. The trigger is rarely a single cue, but rather the whole situation: watching your friends order drinks, hearing the music at the bar, seeing the beers on tap.

We mentally assign our habits to the locations in which they occur: the home, the office, the gym. Each location develops a connection to certain habits and routines. You establish a particular relationship with the objects on your desk, the items on your kitchen counter, the things in your bedroom.

Our behavior is not defined by the objects in the environment but by our relationship to them. In fact, this is a useful way to think about the influence of the environment on your behavior. Stop thinking about your environment as filled with objects. Start thinking about it

as filled with relationships. Think in terms of how you interact with the spaces around you. For one person, her couch is the place where she reads for an hour each night. For someone else, the couch is where he watches television and eats a bowl of ice cream after work. Different people can have different memories—and thus different habits—associated with the same place.

The good news? You can train yourself to link a particular habit with a particular context.

In one study, scientists instructed insomniacs to get into bed only when they were tired. If they couldn't fall asleep, they were told to sit in a different room until they became sleepy. Over time, subjects began to associate the context of their bed with the action of sleeping, and it became easier to quickly fall asleep when they climbed in bed. Their brains learned that sleeping—not browsing on their phones, not watching television, not staring at the clock—was the only action that happened in that room.

The power of context also reveals an important strategy: habits can be easier to change in a new environment. It helps to escape the subtle triggers and cues that nudge you toward your current habits. Go to a new place—a different coffee shop, a bench in the park, a corner of your room you seldom use—and create a new routine there.

It is easier to associate a new habit with a new context than to build a new habit in the face of competing cues. It can be difficult to go to bed early if you watch television in your bedroom each night. It can be hard to study in the living room without getting distracted if that's where you always play video games. But when you step outside your normal environment, you leave your behavioral biases behind. You aren't battling old environmental cues, which allows new habits to form without interruption.

Want to think more creatively? Move to a bigger room, a rooftop patio, or a building with expansive architecture.

Take a break from the space where you do your daily work, which is also linked to your current thought patterns.

Trying to eat healthier? It is likely that you shop on autopilot at your regular supermarket. Try a new grocery store. You may find it easier to avoid unhealthy food when your brain doesn't automatically know where it is located in the store.

When you can't manage to get to an entirely new environment, redefine or rearrange your current one. Create a separate space for work, study, exercise, entertainment, and cooking. The mantra I find useful is "One space, one use."

When I started my career as an entrepreneur, I would often work from my couch or at the kitchen table. In the evenings, I found it very difficult to stop working. There was no clear division between the end of work time and the beginning of personal time. Was the kitchen table my office or the space where I ate meals? Was the couch where I relaxed or where I sent emails? Everything happened in the same place.

A few years later, I could finally afford to move to a home with a separate room for my office. Suddenly, work was something that happened "in here" and personal life was something that happened "out there." It was easier for me to turn off the professional side of my brain when there was a clear dividing line between work life and home life. Each room had one primary use. The kitchen was for cooking. The office was for working.

Whenever possible, avoid mixing the context of one habit with another. When you start mixing contexts, you'll start mixing habits—and the easier ones will usually win out. This is one reason why the versatility of modern technology is both a strength and a weakness. You can use your phone for all sorts of tasks, which makes it a powerful device. But when you can use your phone to do nearly anything, it becomes hard to associate it with one task. You want to be

productive, but you're also conditioned to browse social media, check email, and play video games whenever you open your phone. It's a mishmash of cues.

You may be thinking, "You don't understand. I live in New York City. My apartment is the size of a smartphone. I need each room to play multiple roles." Fair enough. If your space is limited, divide your room into activity zones: a chair for reading, a desk for writing, a table for eating. You can do the same with your digital spaces. I know a writer who uses his computer only for writing, his tablet only for reading, and his phone only for social media and texting. Every habit should have a home.

If you can manage to stick with this strategy, each context will become associated with a particular habit and mode of thought. Habits thrive under predictable circumstances like these. Focus comes automatically when you are sitting at your work desk. Relaxation is easier when you are in a space designed for that purpose. Sleep comes quickly when it is the only thing that happens in your bedroom. If you want behaviors that are stable and predictable, you need an environment that is stable and predictable.

A stable environment where everything has a place and a purpose is an environment where habits can easily form.

Chapter Summary

- Small changes in context can lead to large changes in behavior over time.
- Every habit is initiated by a cue. We are more likely to notice cues that stand out.
- Make the cues of good habits obvious in your environment.

- Gradually, your habits become associated not with a single trigger but with the entire context surrounding the behavior. The context becomes the cue.
- It is easier to build new habits in a new environment because you are not fighting against old cues.