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How an Accountability Partner Can Change Everything

After serving as a pilot in World War II, Roger Fisher attended Harvard Law School and spent thirty-four years specializing in negotiation and conflict management. He founded the Harvard Negotiation Project and worked with numerous countries and world leaders on peace resolutions, hostage crises, and diplomatic compromises. But it was in the 1970s and 1980s, as the threat of nuclear war escalated, that Fisher developed perhaps his most interesting idea.

At the time, Fisher was focused on designing strategies that could prevent nuclear war, and he had noticed a troubling fact. Any sitting president would have access to launch codes that could kill millions of people but would never actually see anyone die because he would always be thousands of miles away.

“My suggestion was quite simple,” he wrote in 1981. “Put that [nuclear] code number in a little capsule, and then implant that capsule right next to the heart of a volunteer. The volunteer would carry with him a big, heavy butcher knife as he accompanied the President. If ever the President wanted to fire nuclear weapons, the only way he could do so would be for him first, with his own hands, to

kill one human being. The President says, ‘George, I’m sorry but tens of millions must die.’ He has to look at someone and realize what death is—what an innocent death is. Blood on the White House carpet. It’s reality brought home.

“When I suggested this to friends in the Pentagon they said, ‘My God, that’s terrible. Having to kill someone would distort the President’s judgment. He might never push the button.’”

Throughout our discussion of the 4th Law of Behavior Change we have covered the importance of making good habits immediately satisfying. Fisher’s proposal is an inversion of the 4th Law: *Make it immediately unsatisfying*.

Just as we are more likely to repeat an experience when the ending is satisfying, we are also more likely to avoid an experience when the ending is painful. Pain is an effective teacher. If a failure is painful, it gets fixed. If a failure is relatively painless, it gets ignored. The more immediate and more costly a mistake is, the faster you will learn from it. The threat of a bad review forces a plumber to be good at his job. The possibility of a customer never returning makes restaurants create good food. The cost of cutting the wrong blood vessel makes a surgeon master human anatomy and cut carefully. When the consequences are severe, people learn quickly.

The more immediate the pain, the less likely the behavior. If you want to prevent bad habits and eliminate unhealthy behaviors, then adding an instant cost to the action is a great way to reduce their odds.

We repeat bad habits because they serve us in some way, and that makes them hard to abandon. The best way I know to overcome this predicament is to increase the speed of the punishment associated with the behavior. There can’t be a gap between the action and the consequences.

As soon as actions incur an immediate consequence, behavior begins to change. Customers pay their bills on

time when they are charged a late fee. Students show up to class when their grade is linked to attendance. We'll jump through a lot of hoops to avoid a little bit of immediate pain.

There is, of course, a limit to this. If you're going to rely on punishment to change behavior, then the strength of the punishment must match the relative strength of the behavior it is trying to correct. To be productive, the cost of procrastination must be greater than the cost of action. To be healthy, the cost of laziness must be greater than the cost of exercise. Getting fined for smoking in a restaurant or failing to recycle adds consequence to an action. Behavior only shifts if the punishment is painful enough and reliably enforced.

In general, the more local, tangible, concrete, and immediate the consequence, the more likely it is to influence individual behavior. The more global, intangible, vague, and delayed the consequence, the less likely it is to influence individual behavior.

Thankfully, there is a straightforward way to add an immediate cost to any bad habit: create a *habit contract*.

THE HABIT CONTRACT

The first seat belt law was passed in New York on December 1, 1984. At the time, just 14 percent of people in the United States regularly wore a seat belt—but that was all about to change.

Within five years, over half of the nation had seat belt laws. Today, wearing a seat belt is enforceable by law in forty-nine of the fifty states. And it's not just the legislation, the number of people wearing seat belts has changed dramatically as well. In 2016, over 88 percent of Americans buckled up each time they got in a car. In just over thirty

years, there was a complete reversal in the habits of millions of people.

Laws and regulations are an example of how government can change our habits by creating a social contract. As a society, we collectively agree to abide by certain rules and then enforce them as a group. Whenever a new piece of legislation impacts behavior—seat belt laws, banning smoking inside restaurants, mandatory recycling—it is an example of a social contract shaping our habits. The group agrees to act in a certain way, and if you don't follow along, you'll be punished.

Just as governments use laws to hold citizens accountable, you can create a habit contract to hold yourself accountable. A habit contract is a verbal or written agreement in which you state your commitment to a particular habit and the punishment that will occur if you don't follow through. Then you find one or two people to act as your accountability partners and sign off on the contract with you.

Bryan Harris, an entrepreneur from Nashville, Tennessee, was the first person I saw put this strategy into action. Shortly after the birth of his son, Harris realized he wanted to shed a few pounds. He wrote up a habit contract between himself, his wife, and his personal trainer. The first version read, “Bryan’s #1 objective for Q1 of 2017 is to start eating correctly again so he feels better, looks better, and is able to hit his long-term goal of 200 pounds at 10% body fat.”

Below that statement, Harris laid out a road map for achieving his ideal outcome:

- Phase #1: Get back to a strict “slow-carb” diet in Q1.
- Phase #2: Start a strict macronutrient tracking program in Q2.

- Phase #3: Refine and maintain the details of his diet and workout program in Q3.

Finally, he wrote out each of the daily habits that would get him to his goal. For example, “Write down all food that he consumes each day and weigh himself each day.”

And then he listed the punishment if he failed: “If Bryan doesn’t do these two items then the following consequence will be enforced: He will have to dress up each workday and each Sunday morning for the rest of the quarter. Dress up is defined as not wearing jeans, t-shirts, hoodies, or shorts. He will also give Joey (his trainer) \$200 to use as he sees fit if he misses one day of logging food.”

At the bottom of the page, Harris, his wife, and his trainer all signed the contract.

My initial reaction was that a contract like this seemed overly formal and unnecessary, especially the signatures. But Harris convinced me that signing the contract was an indication of seriousness. “Anytime I skip this part,” he said, “I start slacking almost immediately.”

Three months later, after hitting his targets for Q1, Harris upgraded his goals. The consequences escalated, too. If he missed his carbohydrate and protein targets, he had to pay his trainer \$100. And if he failed to weigh himself, he had to give his wife \$500 to use as she saw fit. Perhaps most painfully, if he forgot to run sprints, he had to dress up for work every day and wear an Alabama hat the rest of the quarter—the bitter rival of his beloved Auburn team.

The strategy worked. With his wife and trainer acting as accountability partners and with the habit contract clarifying exactly what to do each day, Harris lost the weight.*

To make bad habits unsatisfying, your best option is to make them painful in the moment. Creating a habit

contract is a straightforward way to do exactly that.

Even if you don't want to create a full-blown habit contract, simply having an accountability partner is useful. The comedian Margaret Cho writes a joke or song every day. She does the "song a day" challenge with a friend, which helps them both stay accountable. Knowing that someone is watching can be a powerful motivator. You are less likely to procrastinate or give up because there is an immediate cost. If you don't follow through, perhaps they'll see you as untrustworthy or lazy. Suddenly, you are not only failing to uphold your promises to yourself, but also failing to uphold your promises to others.

You can even automate this process. Thomas Frank, an entrepreneur in Boulder, Colorado, wakes up at 5:55 each morning. And if he doesn't, he has a tweet automatically scheduled that says, "It's 6:10 and I'm not up because I'm lazy! Reply to this for \$5 via PayPal (limit 5), assuming my alarm didn't malfunction."

We are always trying to present our best selves to the world. We comb our hair and brush our teeth and dress ourselves carefully because we know these habits are likely to get a positive reaction. We want to get good grades and graduate from top schools to impress potential employers and mates and our friends and family. We care about the opinions of those around us because it helps if others like us. This is precisely why getting an accountability partner or signing a habit contract can work so well.

Chapter Summary

- The inversion of the 4th Law of Behavior Change is *make it unsatisfying*.
- We are less likely to repeat a bad habit if it is painful or unsatisfying.

- An accountability partner can create an immediate cost to inaction. We care deeply about what others think of us, and we do not want others to have a lesser opinion of us.
- A habit contract can be used to add a social cost to any behavior. It makes the costs of violating your promises public and painful.
- Knowing that someone else is watching you can be a powerful motivator.

HOW TO CREATE A GOOD HABIT

The 1st Law: Make It Obvious

- 1.1:** Fill out the Habits Scorecard. Write down your current habits to become aware of them.
- 1.2:** Use implementation intentions: “I will [BEHAVIOR] at [TIME] in [LOCATION].”
- 1.3:** Use habit stacking: “After [CURRENT HABIT], I will [NEW HABIT].”
- 1.4:** Design your environment. Make the cues of good habits obvious and visible.

The 2nd Law: Make It Attractive

- 2.1:** Use temptation bundling. Pair an action you *want* to do with an action you *need* to do.
- 2.2:** Join a culture where your desired behavior is the normal behavior.
- 2.3:** Create a motivation ritual. Do something you enjoy immediately before a difficult habit.

The 3rd Law: Make It Easy

- 3.1:** Reduce friction. Decrease the number of steps between you and your good habits.
- 3.2:** Prime the environment. Prepare your environment to make future actions easier.
- 3.3:** Master the decisive moment. Optimize the small choices that deliver outsized impact.
- 3.4:** Use the Two-Minute Rule. Downscale your habits until they can be done in two minutes or less.
- 3.5:** Automate your habits. Invest in technology and onetime purchases that lock in future behavior.

The 4th Law: Make It Satisfying

- 4.1:** Use reinforcement. Give yourself an immediate reward when you complete your habit.
- 4.2:** Make “doing nothing” enjoyable. When avoiding a bad habit, design a way to see the benefits.
- 4.3:** Use a habit tracker. Keep track of your habit streak and “don’t break the chain.”
- 4.4:** Never miss twice. When you forget to do a habit, make sure you get back on track immediately.

HOW TO BREAK A BAD HABIT

Inversion of the 1st Law: Make It Invisible

- 1.5:** Reduce exposure. Remove the cues of your bad habits from your environment.

Inversion of the 2nd Law: Make It Unattractive

- 2.4:** Reframe your mind-set. Highlight the benefits of avoiding your bad habits.

Inversion of the 3rd Law: Make It Difficult

- 3.6:** Increase friction. Increase the number of steps between you and your bad habits.
- 3.7:** Use a commitment device. Restrict your future choices to the ones that benefit you.

Inversion of the 4th Law: Make It Unsatisfying

- 4.5:** Get an accountability partner. Ask someone to watch your behavior.
- 4.6:** Create a habit contract. Make the costs of your bad habits public and painful.

You can download a printable version of this habits cheat sheet at:
atomichabits.com/cheatsheet