



WEBINARS

KEY LEARNING SUMMARY

Making Good on Your Organization's Intentions

featuring **Heidi Grant Halvorson, Ph.D.**

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Making Good on Your Organization's Intentions

OVERVIEW

Why is it often so difficult to achieve what we set out to do? People have notoriously difficult times breaking bad habits and pursuing conflicting work and personal goals. Teams often fail to execute plans as expected. In such cases, what needs to be done is known and commitment is high, but there is a “knowing/doing” gap. People just drop the ball. But why?

Motivation science has discovered that most decisions to act on goals are made below conscious awareness. The knowing/doing gap results from how poorly the non-conscious brain makes goal pursuit decisions. It over-prioritizes urgency, doesn't understand importance well, and ignores nebulous goals altogether. If we act on a goal at all, we do so when we must or when it is clear that we can, but not necessarily when we should.

A cognitive technique called “if-then planning” is the solution. It instructs the brain's operating system to make the choices we would prefer in a language that it understands. If-then planning is the most effective technique that motivation science has found to boost the odds of goal achievement, promoting success among individuals and teams.

CONTEXT

Heidi Grant Halvorson explained how a cognitive technique called “if-then planning” can help individuals and teams execute their objectives more effectively.

KEY LEARNINGS

When people fail to do what they intend, lack of commitment is rarely the problem.

Why are diets and New Year's resolutions so often abandoned? People know how to achieve such goals; they just don't do so. There is a “knowing/doing” gap. When people fail to act on perfectly attainable work or personal goals, lack of commitment is usually blamed. (Blaming lack of time is essentially blaming lack of commitment: time is always available for whatever we choose to spend it on.)

But commitment is not the sole problem. Research has shown that those who aren't committed to reach a goal don't attain it 95% of the time. Yet even committed subjects—who fully intend to succeed—still only do so 45% of the time. So commitment is necessary for goal attainment but commitment alone is not sufficient. It doesn't explain the knowing/doing gap. More is going on.

CONTRIBUTORS

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The problem lies in how the unconscious brain processes information, which presents pitfalls for goal pursuit.

We all hold multiple goals, short-term, long-range, work-related, and personal. Time spent advancing one goal is time not spent on another. Tradeoffs are a reality because our time and energy are limited. How do we choose which goal to act on?

Perhaps surprisingly, we usually make goal pursuit decisions unconsciously. If we were to deliberate consciously over which goals to pursue when, the mental tasks would overwhelm us and nothing would ever get done. The amount of mental activity our conscious brains do relative to our unconscious is minimal. (The experience of pulling in your driveway yet not remembering the drive home shows that the unconscious brain is fully capable of directing our activity.)

Efficiency is a benefit of this mental operating system, but there are pitfalls when it comes to goal pursuit. The unconscious brain takes into account the situation, goal, and individual, but does only a so-so job of assessing the:

- **Situation.** The unconscious does a good job with straightforward context questions like, “Is this a time that I could act on my goal?” But it does a bad job judging, “Is this a good time to act on my goal?” It is not programmed for qualitative assessments.
- **Goal.** Three aspects of the goal itself influence how well goal-pursuit decisions are handled:
 - *Clarity.* When a goal is nebulous, such as “communicating more effectively,” the non-conscious brain doesn’t know what it is supposed to do, so it ignores that goal. It does a good job of acting on goals only when what to do is clear.
 - *Importance.* The unconscious does only an okay job of understanding the relative priority of goals. It understands importance best when coupled with urgency.
 - *Urgency.* The unconscious brain is excellent at responding to urgency. People often say they work better under pressure. That is wrong; people simply work under pressure. Without urgency, the brain’s efficient operating system is inclined to want to conserve energy; i.e., procrastinate.
- **Individual.** These aspects are variables at the individual level:
 - *Confidence.* If there is no belief that the goal can be achieved, the brain won’t bother working on it.
 - *Anxiety.* Anxiety can either prompt harder working to get past the situation or impede goal achievement, since stress chemicals undermine cognitive performance. Which happens depends on the person and situation.
 - *Willpower.* Willpower fluctuates with a person’s energy level. The brain avoids willpower-intensive activities if the person isn’t up to them.

These realities of the brain’s operating system lead to the pitfalls of goal pursuit:

- **We take action when we can, but not necessarily when we should.** We don’t notice the best opportunities for the work that needs to be done.

“Part of the problem when we’re executing goals is that we don’t realize that much of it happens unconsciously. We make choices on autopilot.”

—HEIDI GRANT HALVORSON

“Being specific about the goal enables better choices. The brain doesn’t know what to do with vagueness.”

—HEIDI GRANT HALVORSON

- **We take action only when deadlines loom (urgency).** We procrastinate until then. When we do work with urgency, conditions are often less than favorable.
- **We take action only when we have the confidence and willpower to do so.** This also leads to procrastination and time-wasting.

What we need to do is:

- Stop using urgency as a signal to act.
- Identify the best situations in which to act.
- Overcome internal interference.

There is a very effective solution to the pitfalls of goal pursuit: if-then planning.

Here is how if-then planning works. When setting a goal, specify not only what you will do but also when and where you will do it, in advance: “If (or when) Situation X occurs, then I will perform Behavior Y.” This is planning in the language of contingencies, which the unconscious brain understands.

An example of if-then planning: “When the dessert menu comes, I’ll just order coffee.” This replaces the vague goal of “being good” at dessert time, which requires the conscious brain to step in to figure out which dessert is “less bad.” With if-then planning, just coffee is ordered on autopilot and the dieting goal is served.

Research shows that goal setters who implement if-then plans achieve goals much more frequently, and require less willpower to do so (Figure 1).

	If-Then Planners	Control
Sticking to Exercise	91%	39%
Finishing a resume by 5pm	80%	20%
Breast Self-Exam	100%	53%
Completing weekly task on time	Average lateness: 1.5 hours	Average lateness: 8 hours

Figure 1
If-then planning is the key to successful goal attainment.

If-then plans are effective because situation and action become linked in the mind. The brain recognizes the situation as an opportunity to advance the goal. Then, when the situation is detected, action is initiated automatically. There is no conscious deliberation required, so there is less reliance on willpower. If-then plans become “instant habits.” If-then plans are effective for all sorts of goals, including:

- Resisting temptation
- Breaking bad habits

“I promise you don’t work better under pressure. You simply work under pressure.”

—HEIDI GRANT HALVORSON

- Dealing with distraction
- Coping with self-doubt

If-then planning can improve team execution.

If-then planning works just as well to keep teams on track toward achieving work objectives as it does to keep individuals on track to reaching goals. In fact, it is the most effective technique that motivation science has discovered for improving the execution of teams. The steps for implementing if-then planning in teams are:

1. Identify outcome you want to achieve.
2. Identify the specific actions that need to be taken to execute the goal.
3. Assign a person to be responsible for each action.
4. Determine the best situation in which to take each action.
5. Link the person, action, and situation to an if-then plan.
6. Remind your team of the plan.

If-then planning works especially well as a solution to counteract the pitfalls of “group think”; i.e., ways that people in groups tend to think and behave. Two group-think problems are very responsive to the technique:

Group-think problem #1: Because teams focus on shared information, individually held but important information is unused.

A study highlighted the prevalence and potential harm of groups' unconscious tendency to discuss only information that is shared and to not share self-held information. Three teammates were tasked with choosing the most qualified job candidate among three. “Candidate C” was the most qualified, the only one possessing all nine traits sought. The teammates each knew three different points about Candidate C, but held more pieces of shared information about the others. Candidate C was chosen only 18% of the time over candidates about which teammates held more shared information.

When an if-then plan was introduced, the experiment yielded a different result. The if-then plan was to review candidates' positive qualities before deciding (i.e., if we have shared information, then we will decide). Candidate C then was chosen 48% of the time.

Group-think problem #2: Teams' commitment to bad ideas tends to escalate as evidence of failure mounts.

Teams are particularly bad at knowing when to quit, accept defeat, and move on. People associate a belief that it is time to throw in the towel with betrayal of the team. The solution: use if-then planning to evaluate projects as if they had been initiated by other people. That restores the objectivity needed to make the tough choice to cut bait.

“This problem of execution [in teams] is widespread. When you know the pitfalls of execution and how much they have to do with how our brains are wired, it's much easier to address them.”

— HEIDI GRANT HALVORSON

BIOGRAPHIES

Heidi Grant Halvorson, Ph.D.

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Dr. Heidi Grant Halvorson is a social psychologist who researches, writes, and speaks about the science of motivation. She is the Associate Director of the Motivation Science Center at the Columbia Business School, and author of the best-selling books: *Succeed: How We Can All Reach Our Goals*, *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently*, *Focus: Use Different Ways of Seeing The World for Success and Influence* (co-written with E. Tory Higgins), and *The 8 Motivational Challenges*.

Heidi is also a contributor to the *Harvard Business Review*, *99u*, *Fast Company*, *WSJ.com*, *Forbes*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Psychology Today*.

In addition to her work as author and co-editor of the highly-regarded academic book *The Psychology of Goals* (Guilford, 2009), she has authored papers in her field's most prestigious journals, including the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, *European Journal of Social Psychology*, and *Judgment and Decision Making*. She has received numerous grants from the National Science Foundation for her research on goals and achievement.

Sarah Green (Moderator)

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Sarah Green is a senior associate editor at *Harvard Business Review* and host of the HBR IdeaCast, which has been nominated for two National Magazine Awards. Prior to joining HBR, Sarah spent five years as a baseball writer and worked as a researcher for Pulitzer Prize-winning *Boston Globe* columnist, Ellen Goodman. She is a magna cum laude graduate of Brown University, where she wrote her honors thesis on Jane Austen.

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