

The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business

By Charles Duhigg

Published by Random House, 2012, 371 pages

Reviewed by:

Catherine L. Bradford (cbradfo4@kennesaw.edu), Director of Learning Communities and Graduation Coach, Kennesaw State University

As educators, we are in the business of thinking and teaching others to think, so it may come as an unwelcome surprise to learn that, most of the time, we are not thinking at all, but rather operating on automatic pilot. Thanks to a cluster of brain cells called the basal ganglia, we are continually developing and memorizing routines that serve as behavioral scripts telling us what to do without the need for additional cerebral activity. Put another way, we are hardwired to be creatures of habit. *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* is an entertaining and thought-provoking exploration of habits—how and why we create them, how we can change them, and how some companies capitalize on our habits by studying them to predict and influence what we do with our time and money.

Written by *New York Times* journalist Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit* is an excellent choice for a common reader for several reasons. An understanding of the subject matter is vital for all who want to shape their futures for the better. College students will find the book relevant because they can apply the material immediately to change or develop habits that set them up for success in school and beyond. The book is especially well-suited for first-year, senior, and transfer students because people experiencing major transitions are most open to creating new habits and modifying existing ones, according to Duhigg.

The Power of Habit is well-written and filled with fascinating human-interest stories that illustrate the author's points. While the non-fiction book is 371 pages in length, the stories will keep students flipping through the pages out of curiosity: Did a loving husband really strangle his wife in his sleep without his knowledge or control? Is it true that Target can figure out if a woman is pregnant before she knows it herself? Why does the pop radio station play Maroon Five songs several times each hour? What do habits have to do with Rosa Parks, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the ensuing success of the Civil Rights movement?

Duhigg's book, and the stories it contains, can serve as a springboard for classroom discussions in numerous disciplines, including psychology, history, business, communication, philosophy, ethics, political science, health, sociology, and the first-year seminar. In addition, the reading may encourage students to think critically about the personal information they share freely through social media platforms once they read about how companies are collecting, buying, and using this information to influence habits and purchasing decisions.

The Power of Habit is organized well for a common reader. It is divided into three sections, each illustrated with numerous captivating stories and examples. The first section examines the habits of individuals, including the purpose of habits, how they are created, and how they can be changed. The second section deals with the habits of organizations, including how leaders can create organizational change by concentrating on “keystone” habits, those habits that are so fundamental and powerful that they have the ability to create a domino effect of widespread change. This section also explores how companies, ranging from Kroger and Walt Disney to the \$27 billion casino operator called Harrah's Entertainment, have developed sophisticated data analysis capabilities in order to target their marketing and capitalize on the habits of individuals by predicting and influencing (some

would say manipulating) their spending habits. The final section explores the habits of societies, including the social habits necessary to create cultural change. This section also challenges readers to grapple with ethical, philosophical, and legal considerations when reflecting on the potential power of habits to override free will.

In the first section, Duhigg learns through interviews with researchers that habits perform a fundamental service—the conservation of mental energy. Without the ability to operate automatically when performing certain tasks, such as getting dressed or backing the car out of the driveway, we would be overwhelmed by a constant barrage of stimulation requiring a multitude of minute decisions. Habits are a form of what Duhigg calls “mental efficiency.”

Duhigg explains that habits are created through practice and the formation of a habit loop. The habit loop consists of a cue, which is followed by an action or routine, which is met with a reward. The juice that fuels the loop and cements it into habit is a craving or anticipation for the reward. Many habits serve us well by automating actions that are good for our wellbeing or help us function in the world, such as exercising, washing our hands, driving a car, and showing up for school or work. However, not all habits are good ones, and most of us have formed at least a few habits without our conscious participation. For example, Duhigg notes that many Americans have inadvertently created fast-food habits by pulling into McDonald’s a few times for the sake of convenience. Without realizing it, a habit loop was formed: cue (golden arches), routine (pull in and place an order), reward (hunger satisfied), craving (anticipation of salts, fats, and sugars from the burgers, fries, and Coke).

Duhigg provides examples of habits in the making. For instance, a national habit of teeth brushing was created in the early 1900s with the introduction of Pepsodent toothpaste and its clever advertising campaign that promoted a habit loop: cue (film on teeth), routine (brush with Pepsodent toothpaste), reward (clean teeth), craving (tingling sensation in mouth caused by ingredients that are natural irritants to mouth tissue). Duhigg relays the marketing story of Febreze air freshener, a product that almost flopped, but which now brings in more than \$1 billion annually for Procter & Gamble. P&G was able to turn the product around once it deciphered housecleaning habits and tapped into the reward and craving parts of the housecleaning habit loop.

Readers learn that habits are easily formed, but they cannot be abolished. Habits can be modified, however, by first believing change is possible and then applying the “Golden Rule of habit change,” according to Duhigg. The rule is to keep the same cue and reward but insert a different routine. This equation for habit modification has been used successfully by numerous individuals, companies, and self-help groups, including 12-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, which is sought out by 2.1 million new people each year. Duhigg also provides sports, military, and national dietary changes as examples of successful habit modifications.

The second section of *The Power of Habit* deals with organizations and habits. The section begins with the story of Paul O’Neill, retired CEO of Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA), who was able to turn the company around and change its culture by focusing on a single habit: worker safety. His critics, including many investors, thought he was crazy until the company started turning record profits. Duhigg calls fundamental habits like this “keystone habits.” He explains, “The habits that matter most are the ones that, when they start to shift, dislodge and remake other patterns.” Duhigg attributes the success of Starbucks, at least in part, to its employee development plan that helps workers develop positive keystone habits for dealing with stress.

In addition to addressing organizational habits, Duhigg reports on the relatively new but increasingly sophisticated use of data analytics that enables companies to engage in precision marketing. By purchasing customer lifestyle and demographic information and tracking individual spending patterns, companies can target marketing to the individual by predicting what they want and

need—sometimes before the consumer even realizes he or she has a want or need. Duhigg interviews a statistician with the retail giant Target and learns that one of his first tasks on the job was to write an algorithm that could predict whether or not a woman is pregnant based on her buying patterns. Readers learn how retailers such as Target “sandwich” their individualized advertising between generic ads in order not to spook customers with how much they know. This section of the book also takes a look at the music industry and how hits are made by strategically “sandwiching” new songs between familiar songs in order to tap into listening habit loops.

Duhigg turns his attention to the habits of society in the third and final section of the book. He looks at the success of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s through the lens of social patterns. He makes a convincing case that the habits of friendship (Rosa Parks was well known and respected in Montgomery, Alabama circles) and the power of social peer pressure helped fuel and sustain the movement. In this section, Duhigg also introduces readers to the blurry line between free will and the automated behavior produced by sleep walking, night terrors, some medications, addictions, and habits. When should society hold a person responsible for their actions, and when should society forgive a person of responsibility? To illustrate the complexity of this question, Duhigg juxtaposes two stories: one resulting in personal debt, an ordinary wife and mom who lost her struggle with a gambling addiction and forfeited on a debt to a casino, and one that resulted in murder, an ordinary husband and dad who, during a night terror, killed his sleeping wife by strangling her with his bare hands. Duhigg weighs in on the question of responsibility and closes the book with a call to action: examine your habits and empower yourself to change the ones you do not like.

Because of its applicability to college students, its relevance to multiple disciplines, the ethical questions it raises, and the fact that it is an absorbing and educational read, I highly recommend *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*. It has the makings of a successful common reader that will be enjoyed by students and faculty. Do read it for yourself; the rewards are greater than the small investment of reading time.