The Power of Habit
Why we do what we do in life and business

By Charles Duhigg

Group Members
April Irwin
Mike Jones
Karen Burns

This book review is a collaboration of the group members above. Each member wrote a section of the report and used Google Docs to collaborate. Mike wrote the synopsis, Karen wrote the analysis, and April wrote the practical application. Once the initial drafts were collected, each member read and edited the entire report before submission.
Synopsis

*The Power of Habit* by Charles Duhigg was a fascinating read and an interesting insight into the formation, maintenance, and changing of habits and the human psyche. Duhigg states that our daily choices are not choices at all, but rather they are habits that have become embedded deep down in our brain and they are a large part of our life. By better understanding our habits, we can improve upon them and positively affect our own personal lives as well as the organizations or businesses that we work for and represent. Duhigg offers ample stories with insights from each study and he explains why each step is an important part of the habit process.

In part one, Duhigg introduces the reader into the habits of individuals and provides an illustration of just how powerful habits are and how they can impact our daily functions. In opening chapter, Duhigg introduces us to man who suffered from viral encephalitis which impacted his short term memory which rendered him unable to remember anything past a few minutes. However, the man was still able to create and accomplish things based off of habits that he had established after his illness. Scientist learned that the basal ganglia was responsible for habits and that part of the man’s brain was unaffected. Even though he could not retain any new information on a conscious level, unconsciously he still created habits without knowing it. This just illustrates how powerful habits truly are.

Habits are formed as the brain takes complicated steps that we repeatedly perform, and it begins to “chunk” them together in an effort to be more efficient. This process is what enables us to do our daily tasks without much thought, like backing out of the driveway. Duhigg points out that backing out our driveway is a task that took skill and effort to learn but overtime it has become an effortless task thanks to our brain compacting the information and creating a habit. Habits are a three step process that Duhigg explains as the “habit loop.” First, something cues our mind, which triggers our brain to go into our habit mode. Next, we perform a routine. This can be a physical, emotional or mental behavior. Finally, we experience a reward. A reward does not necessarily have to be something tangible but a sense of accomplishment or a feeling.

New habits are easier to establish than changing habits. Duhigg illustrates this point by discussing how one man helped Americans practice better hygiene and increase the amount of people who brushed their teeth. He unknowingly established a cue by asking people to feel their teeth and the film that was on there and then he asked them to brush. An ingredient in the toothpaste left a tingling feeling in the user’s mouth and that served as the reward. Before long people established a habit of brushing their teeth.

As a juxtaposition, Duhigg discusses how much harder it is to overwrite old habits with new ones. He discusses the process of AA and the successes and failures of Coach Tony Dungee. In both scenarios he outlines that to replace a bad habit, one needs to recognize the cue that establishes the routine and then try and rewrite the habit by replacing it with a new routine. This is what is known as the “Golden Rule of Habit Change.” In order to change a bad habit you must change the routine itself. You simply cannot rid yourself of a bad habit but you can change the habit.

Duhigg goes on to reveal that some need another ingredient for success. In the case of AA and Coach Dungee, Duhigg discusses a flaw in the change process. It seems in both cases that in times of crisis or extreme duress that many people will revert back to the old habits and forget about the new ones. Duhigg goes on to discuss how the key to overcoming this relapse for many is belief. This is often to the chagrin of science as belief is not usually measured, but as a psychological characteristic, a belief is an important part of restructuring one’s habits.
Part two examines the habits of successful organizations and Duhigg introduces us to the term keystone habit. A keystone habit is a habit that causes a chain reaction of habit change. In other words, if you can change this one habit, other habits will change as well. Duhigg provides us with the story of a man who revolutionized ALCOA by focusing on improving safety throughout the company. This set off a reaction that caused performance, communication and many other aspects within the company to improve. Over time the company became more profitable and it was all the result of changing a small habit and getting what Duhigg and other researchers call a “small win.” This is often not an easy task and sometimes it is a matter of trial and error until you find a small victory that everyone can focus and agree upon. This leads to other habits subconsciously changing and improving as a result of this small win and keystone habit change.

Duhigg also discusses how willpower can be an indicator of success and the importance of making willpower and automatic response. Interestingly researchers have suggested that willpower is a perishable thing. You can increase the amount of willpower you have but everyone has an amount that can be depleted. The key to ensuring that you have enough willpower when it is needed is methodical planning, as in the case of Starbucks Training, of your routines so that you do not give up when pain and temptation are at their greatest. By understanding your routines and rehearsing these scenarios, you will not give up or give in when there are issues or situations that would normally trigger the cue for you to resort back to the old habit and behavior.

Habits can also makes predictable and therefore if companies can tap into our habits and understanding them it will in turn make them more profitable. Duhigg discuss how companies, like Target, not only use our habits but also manipulate our habits to increase their businesses. According to research, most customers purchase items based on sight. When a customer sees an item, the habit of using the product or buying that product overpowers the intentions you had when you first came in the store. These are individualized and unique to each shopper. To remedy this large retail stores across the nation started collected massive amounts of data on each shopper and personalizing the experience for them based on advertisements, coupons and other tactics to get you to come into their stores. In short, they tap into our habits, offer cues which kick starts our habit process and leads to the retail stores gaining financially.

The final section of The Power of Habits, Duhigg discusses the power of habits and the morality of being aware of our habits and ultimately responsible for them. Habits affect our social structure and have been recognized by leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. as imperative for the success of a movement. MLK knew that the Civil Rights Movement would be challenged and that their responses would dictate how successful the entire Movement would be. He preached about the power of love and being passively non-violent in the face of violence. He knew that if people could not rally against a retaliation for their protests then the movement would have a chance at being successful. He talked about love, peace, and non-responsive action to the point where it became a habit.

Our habits are powerful vices of our mind. We have a moral responsibility to understand our habits. We cannot just exist in this world without acknowledging our actions and our choices and understanding the outcomes that we experience are the results of the decisions we made, many by habits that we have established overtime. Charles Duhigg gives us the knowledge and the power to recognize our habits and the steps to change them but ultimately it is our responsibility to tap into the power of habits.
Analysis

It is evident that a great deal of work went into writing this book. *The Power of Habit* is easy to read consisting of story after story interwoven with scientific research. Duigg’s writing draws from books, research studies, magazine and newspaper articles, videos, and interviews from either first-hand accounts, eye-witnesses or experts, such as museum curators (p. 311) and historians (p. 354).

The book tells true stories from the lens of psychology and neuroscience. The emphasis is on WHY and HOW habits are formed. It is not a true step-by-step guide to help people break bad habits. However, a visit to the author’s website, [www.charlesduhigg.com](http://www.charlesduhigg.com), reveals study guides for changing habits, keeping a new year’s resolution, and even a teacher's guide to using the *Power of Habit* in the classroom. The guides are free to download once you register.

Many people are reading this book because they either want to break a bad habit or create a good habit in their personal life, business or in the life of someone close. The first chapters deal with the understanding of the habit loop (cue, routine, reward), how to create a habit and how to break a habit. If the reader goes no further, they at least have a plan of action and can begin reflecting and evaluating on how to make changes in their life. However, Duigg’s writing is essentially good storytelling and his positive tone and information encourages the reader to keep reading. He captures the audience by mixing stories together leaving the reader hanging in the middle of one story while starting another story.

Moving to Part Two, Duigg provides detailed insight into organizations that might not have become a success had they not figured out and harnessed the power of habit. One must be sure to recognize that the stories evolved over time. In some cases, much time, with many mistakes made along the way. Yet the insight into the final outcome, success, again is enough to keep the reader feeling positive and encouraged.

Examples of that success include Michael Phelps, the olympic swimmer, who worked everyday to be the best. It took time, practice, endurance, self-discipline, and willpower. His routine is what kept him calm before each race and in the time of crisis, like when his goggles filled up with water. Another example is Paul O’Neal who worked hard to get everyone onboard with his zero safety accidents program when he started as CEO of Alcoa in 1987. It took over a year to begin seeing improvements due to the implemented changes, but they did see improvements. As of 2010, Alcoa still has not reached zero accidents, but they are doing well and have seen a huge improvement in overall safety awareness and best practices.

In part three, Duigg discusses the amazing power of societies and relationships. This section can easily be tied back to discussion in part two about the need for groups and partners in AA. It also relates to the power of “belief” when creating change.

As Duigg states in “A Note on Sources,” many of the sources used for writing the book were given the opportunity to review the facts and offer corrections, comments, and clarification. When Duigg did not make a direct change in the book, he added the direct comments from the source in the notes section. These fact-checking pieces of communication provide further insight into the actual events. In some cases, the source or their spokesperson indicated parts of the information were incorrect but would not identify which parts (p. 331).

This book is worthy of attention and a great resource for understanding habits in oneself and in others.
Practical Application

Duhigg does an excellent job of summarizing the research behind how habits are formed and forming habits is essentially one major part of how children are educated in schools, how schools are run, and how school districts maintain their network of schools. One of the main tenets of this book is how habits are formed, which he describes as having three parts: the cue, the routine, and the reward. Formation of habits is vital within a classroom setting, but also can help school administrators and school staff in becoming more efficient with their time and resources.

The first practical application for the material covered in this book is that each person within education should be able to identify their daily, weekly, and monthly habits. Duhigg acknowledges that while habits are foundational to our behavior, they are highly complex in their formation and maintenance. He suggests that identifying our habits begins with seeing where a problem exists and then being able to decipher the cue, routine, and reward within the habit. For administrators and teachers, the habit may be a certain routine for discipline that simply isn’t as effective as it could be. For teachers, being able to recognize their own rewards and routines may help them identify their students’ routines that are creating disruptions within the classroom. Perhaps it’s not even that extreme, but a teacher whose students seem to check out whenever he or she comes to the math lesson may be setting up a lesson-based routine that allows students to mentally check out.

The second application, and an important aspect of identifying habits is that some of the first ones to be picked up on are probably keystone habits. Keystone habits provide the structure and culture for new habits to flourish. Creating a culture of success within schools would be revolutionary considering the current culture focuses on everything that schools are not doing right. A culture of success and flourishing educators and students begins with the organizational habits of the school or school district. Duhigg describes this as, “cultures grow out of the keystone habits in every organization, whether leaders are aware of them or not” (p. 124). When school administrators are able to first identify their routines, and then pick out their keystone habits, culture change can happen. This awareness is vital to being able to change personal habits, student habits, or school-wide habits.

The third, and final, practical application for education based on the principles in this book is that teachers, parents, and administrators can use the crises that occur regularly in classrooms and schools, things like spilled paint or not great federal test scores, to begin changing habits within the classroom or school. According to Duhigg, “organizational habits become malleable enough to both assign responsibility and create a more equitable balance of power” (p. 175). In the case of the classroom, it means a new habit of painting can be established so that when the paint is spilled students don’t get it everywhere. In a school, it might mean creating a testing schedule that allows teachers, staff, and students adequate teacher-to-student ratios and breaks. These crises can also be the foundation for cultivating, in teachers and students, the belief that success is possible. This belief is what helped take football teams to the SuperBowl and allow businesses to thrive.

Again, identifying the routines that may have allowed a certain crisis to take place will be crucial to this process. Duhigg mentions in the section about changing habits that maintaining the reward is one way that people in Alcoholics Anonymous have been able to change habits as well. The rewards for each routine will, of course, be specific to each school, teacher, student, administrator within the setting of the school or classroom, but keeping this in mind throughout
the school day or professional development meeting will be helpful in changing habits that have been around for many years.