



CHAPTER TWENTY

RE-GROOVING CRITICAL BEHAVIOR

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Knowing what to do and doing it automatically are two very different things. We can watch a video, read a book, or attend a seminar that imparts useful information and perspectives; however, much that is required of the new leadership style is not about what we know, but about how we operate when the heat is on. And we often need professional help in real time to instill new behaviors and to attain the enhanced levels at which we want to function.

It's not about what we can spout at the next staff meeting. It's about consistently applied, high-leverage responses and activities that happen when we're on cruise control. It's about what we can be trusted to be *doing* under pressure from the real world. To rapidly make those kinds of permanent changes and enhancements to our lives and work styles, we need models, mentors, and—most importantly—personal coaches with whom we spend real time learning to do what we need to be doing.

As leaders we *want* to work differently, and when we understand *how* we can work differently, we want it to happen *yesterday*. But, self-propelling strategic conduct will seldom occur by itself and certainly does not become second nature quickly.

We can shift our behaviors through will power, but only for a limited time. If you are especially strong-willed, it may take a few days. If you're on a retreat in the mountains, with no phone, fax, or computer, it may take a week. But soon, the intense onslaught of your temporal engagements is back at your door. There are too many things to focus your conscious attention on, and you don't have the personal bandwidth to keep going in the new direction. In other words, you *know* better, but you don't *do* better.

We all have our weak points, and some of those may be in mission-critical or values-critical areas. For example, let's say that not long ago your results-oriented personality was required to help get your company off the ground. Now that same personality is limiting the initiative of your senior team. Or let's say that not long ago your tolerance of incomplete projects was required so that you could stay sane and focused on the company's goals. Now, you're paying the price for agreements others have not kept.

There are many things we all need and want to learn—to give us the edge we want or to unlock the potential we strive to fulfill. One of the two greatest values of a coach in the consultant's role is to give us new and useful points of view. *Perspective* is the slipperiest and most valuable commodity on this planet. We must learn to see “outside the box,” and we need to hear non-vested opinions about what we're doing and how we're doing it. This is, and always will be, the value of consultants.

If we want change to happen *now*, and we want it to *stick*, we must put ourselves in the hands of a trainer who coaxes and coaches us through the new behaviors we desire in real time, in the real world. We need and want someone to be the stake in the ground that we can hang on to, someone who will help us get past the deep grooves of our unconscious habits. We need a tether that will hold us steady against past conditioning and the present demands on our lives that distract us from learning new behavior.

The most effective way to change our patterns is to commit to a coach whose job it is to hold us to a focus and a format that helps us retreat. It could be a new way to think, a new way to feel, or a new way to act and respond, but if it's a “new way” at all, it's unfamiliar territory for us, and it must be made much more friendly to our basic nervous systems. We want to become “unconsciously competent.” We don't want to be burdened or beholden to another person to keep us in line forever. We

know that ultimately we need to *do it ourselves*, but we must acknowledge that the path to that freedom is not free.

I have found it useful to review with my clients an old behavioral model that identifies four stages of moving to permanently changed conduct:

1. *Unconscious Incompetence*: “I don’t even know that I don’t know what I don’t know.” Many people wander around in the miasma of not realizing that what they don’t realize is a problem. They’re just in it and basically numb. Pain-aspiration (and therefore change) factor = zero.
2. *Conscious Incompetence*: “I now know where I ought to be and what I ought to be doing, but I don’t know how to get myself there or how to get myself to do it.” They now know things could and should be different from the way they are, but are not sure how to make them different. “I know that we should be at the cutting edge, facilitating innovation, but what do I do to reach that end this afternoon?” Pain-aspiration factor = variable, depending on the commitment to the new standard. This is the stage people often find themselves in after a great book, seminar, or other educational and eye-opening experience.
3. *Conscious Competence*: “I know now how to make it happen and I know I can do it, but I have to keep reminding myself to stay on track.” Pain-aspiration factor = variable, depending on commitment to the new standard and the delta between current reality and that standard. This is tricky ground. We’ve been to the seminar; we’ve tried and tested some things ourselves; we’ve *really* gotten enthused because we know that we can do it and how to get there; but we aren’t able to maintain it.
4. *Unconscious Competence*: “I just do it. I only think about it when I *don’t* do it, and I then *have* to go do it.” This is real motivation, and it happens when you would feel awkward if you *didn’t* do it. Of *course* you empty your voice mail and your in-basket every day. Of course your staff is happy and eager to come to work. If they weren’t, it would feel too weird—you just don’t let that happen.

The challenge in reaching the level of unconscious competence is to frame the subtle behaviors that limit or expand our effectiveness in the world. The first step in meeting this challenge is to find the person or

people who have models and formats designed to help re-groove our patterns of thinking and acting. Those leaders who have the confidence to enter this new territory of coaching, who are willing to leverage the best tools in order to restructure their automatic response systems, will be able to create ever greater opportunities for their organizations and for themselves.

About the Contributor

David Allen has more than twenty years' experience as a management consultant, productivity coach, and educator. He has conducted performance enhancement workshops for more than 250,000 professionals, with current ongoing programs in government, aerospace, financial services, retail, and information technology.

As well as being president of the management consulting and training company David Allen & Co., David is also a founding partner of Actioneer, Inc., a San Francisco-based software company.

David has developed and implemented management and productivity programs for such diverse organizations as Microsoft, LL Bean, Lockheed, QVC, Fidelity Investments, Massachusetts General Hospital, and the United States Navy. Having logged thousands of hours individually coaching managers and executives, he has developed a revolutionary, unique system for implementing personal and corporate goals within customized personal systems and organizational structures.

David has published articles in professional journals, and has been featured in both audio and video training programs. He is a regularly featured keynote speaker on the topic of individual and team productivity for many national and governmental organizations, including the National Office Products Association, the Young Presidents' Organization, and the United States Department of Justice.