

Triggers

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Introduction

These triggers appear suddenly and unexpectedly. They can be major moments, like Phil's concussion, or as minor as a paper cut. They can be pleasant, like a teacher's praise that elevates our discipline and ambition - and turns our life around 180 degrees. Or they can be counterproductive, like an ice-cream cone that tempts us off our diet or peer pressure that confuses us into doing something we know is wrong. They can stir our competitive instincts, from the common workplace carrot of a bigger paycheck to the annoying sight of a rival outdistancing us. They can drain us, like the news that a loved one is seriously ill or that our company is up for sale. They can be as elemental as the sound of rain triggering a sweet memory.

Part 1: Why Don't We Become the Person We Want to Be?

Chapter 1: The Immutable Truths of Behavioral Change

Truth #1: Meaningful behavioral change is very hard to do.

We can't admit that we need to change

We do not appreciate inertia's power over us.

We don't know how to execute a change. There's a difference between motivation and understanding and ability.

Chapter 2: Belief Triggers That Stop Behavioral Change in Its Tracks

And so on. In the end, after a barrage of lawsuits, a judge struck down the law for being "arbitrary and capricious." My point: even when the individual and societal benefits of changing a specific behavior are indisputable, we are geniuses at inventing reasons to avoid change. It is much easier, and more fun, to attack the strategy of the person who's trying to help than to try to solve the problem.

Our inner beliefs trigger failure before it happens. They sabotage lasting change by canceling its possibility. We employ these beliefs as articles of faith to justify our inaction and then wish away the result. I call them belief triggers.

1. If I understand, I will do.

You know that there's a difference between *understanding* and *doing*. Just because people understand what to do doesn't ensure that they will actually do it. This belief triggers *confusion*.

3. Today is a special day.

When we want to make an excuse for errant behavior, any day can be designated as a "special day."

4. "At least I'm better than..."

5. I shouldn't need help and structure.

8. I won't get distracted and nothing unexpected will occur.

9. An epiphany will suddenly change my life.

10. My change will be permanent and I will never have to worry again.

13. No one is paying attention to me.

We believe that we can occasionally lapse back into bad behavior because people aren't paying close attention. We are practically invisible, triggering a dangerous preference for *isolation*. Even worse, it's only half true. While our slow and steady improvement may not be as obvious to others as it is to us, when we revert to our previous behavior, people *always* notice.

There is an even larger reason that explains why we don't make the changes we want to make - greater than the high quality of our excuses or our devotion to our belief triggers. It's called the environment.

Chapter 3: It's the Environment

If there is one "disease" that I'm trying to cure in this book, it revolves around our total misapprehension of our environment. We think we are in sync with our environment, but actually it's at war with us. We think we control our

environment but in fact it controls us. We think our external environment is conspiring in our favor - that is, helping us - when actually it is taxing and draining us. It is not interested in what it can give us. It's only interested in what it can take from us.

The situational aspect of our environment is what I've been working on with my one-on-one coaching clients. It's not that these very smart executives don't know that circumstances change from moment to moment as they go through their day. They know. But at the level these people operate in - where nine out of ten times they are the most powerful person in the room - they can easily start believing they're immune to the environment's ill will. In a frenzy of delusion, they actually believe they control their environment, not the other way around.

But for now let's absorb and wallow in Nadeem's hard-won appreciation that our environment is a relentless triggering machine. If we do not create and control our environment, our environment creates and controls us. And the result turns us into someone we do not recognize.

Chapter 4: Identifying Our Triggers

This is how feedback ultimately triggers desirable behavior. Once we deconstruct feedback into its four stages of evidence, relevance, consequence, and action, the world never looks the same again. Suddenly we understand that our good behavior is not random. It's logical. It follows a pattern. It makes sense. It's within our control. It's something we can repeat. It's why some obese people finally - and instantly - take charge of their eating habits when they're told that they have diabetes and will die or go blind or lose a limb if they don't make a serious lifestyle change. Death, blindness, and amputation are consequences we understand and can't brush aside.

A behavioral trigger is any stimulus that impacts our behavior.

6. A trigger can be productive or counterproductive.

This is the most important distinction. Productive triggers push us toward becoming the person we want to be. Counterproductive triggers pull us away.

Triggers are not inherently "good" or "bad." What matters is our response to them.

To fully appreciate the reason for this, it's helpful to take a closer look at these last two dimensions of triggers - encouraging or discouraging, productive or counterproductive. They express the timeless tension between *what we want* and *what we need*. We want short-term gratification while we need long-term benefit. And we never get a break from choosing one or the other. It's the defining conflict of adult behavioral change. And we write the definitions.

We Don't Need or Want It: I find the grid useful as an analytical tool with my clients. It enables them to take inventory of the triggers in their lives, which, if nothing else, increases their awareness about their environment. More important, it reveals whether they're operating in a productive quadrant. The right side of the matrix is where successful people want to be, moving forward on their behavioral goals.

Chapter 5: How Triggers Work

When I was getting my doctorate at UCLA, the classic sequencing template for analyzing problem behavior in children was known as ABC, for antecedent, behavior, and consequence. The antecedent is the event that prompts the behavior. The behavior creates a consequence.

The therapist instructs Mandy to carry an index card and make a check mark on the card each time she feels the finger tension. A week later she returns to the therapist with twenty-eight check marks on the card, but she is now enlightened about the cues that send her fingers to her mouth.

I've isolated three eye-blink moments - first the impulse, then the awareness, then a choice - that comprise the crucial intervals between the trigger and our eventual behavior. These intervals are so brief we sometimes fail to segregate them from what we regard as our "behavior." But experience and common sense tell us they're real.

We already do this in the big moments. When we go into our first meeting with the company's CEO, we are

mindful that every word, every gesture, every question is a trigger. When we're asked for our opinion, we don't say the first thing that comes to mind. We know we've entered a field of land mines where any misstep may have unappealing consequences. We measure our words like a diplomat facing an adversary. Perhaps we've even prepared our answers ahead of time. Either way, we don't yield to impulse. We reflect, choose, then respond.

Paradoxically, the big moments - packed with triggers, stress, raw emotions, high stakes, and thus high potential for disaster - are easy to handle. When successful people know it's showtime, they prepare to put on a show.

It's the little moments that trigger some of our most outsized and unproductive responses.

Chapter 6: We Are Superior Planners and Inferior Doers

Hersey and Blanchard believed that leaders should

- keep track of the shifting levels of "readiness" among their followers,
- stay highly attuned to each situation,
- acknowledge that situations change constantly, and
- fine-tune their leadership style to fit the follower's readiness.

This was "situational leadership." It dissected the relationship between leaders and their followers into four distinct styles:

- *Directing* is for employees requiring a lot of specific guidance to complete the task. The leader might say, "Chris, here's what I'd like you to do, step by step. And here's when I need it done." It's primarily a one-way conversation, with little input from the employee.
- *Coaching* is for employees who need more than average guidance to complete the task, but with above-average amounts of two-way dialogue. Coaching is for people who both want and need to learn. The leader might say, "Chris, here's what I'd like you to do," and then ask for input: "What do you think, Chris?"
- *Supporting* is for employees with the skills to complete the task but who may lack the confidence to do it on their own. This style features below-average amounts of direction. The leader might say, "Chris, here's the task. How do you think it should be done? Let's talk about it. How can I help you on this one?"
- *Delegating* is for employees who score high on motivation, ability, and confidence. They know what to do, how to do it, and can do it on their own. The leader might say, "Chris, here's the assignment. You have a great track record. If I can help, just ask. If not, you're on your own."

Measure Your Need, Choose Your Style

It slowly dawned on me that the precepts of situational leadership might be useful in the context of self-managed adult behavioral change. What if the planner in each of us, like an effective leader with his or her subordinates, could size up the situation at any point during the day and adopt the appropriate management style for the doer in us? It's a simple two-step: measure the need, choose the style.

This is where the analogy between situational leadership in the workplace and in ourselves applies. In order to change his unproductive behavior as a leader of others Rennie first had to change the behavior between the leader and the follower in him. He couldn't automatically rely on a seamless compliance between these two personas.

Chapter 7: Forecasting the Environment

1. Anticipation

Successful people are not completely oblivious to their environment. In the major moments of our lives, when the outcome really matters and failure is not an option, we are masters of anticipation.

When our performance has clear and immediate consequences, we rise to the occasion. We create our environment. We don't let it re-create us.

The problem is that the majority of our day consists of minor moments, when we're not thinking about the environment or our behavior because we don't associate the situation with any consequences.

2. Avoidance

Peter Drucker famously said, "Half the leaders I have met don't need to learn what to do. They need to learn what to stop."

It's no different with our environment. Quite often our smartest response to an environment is avoiding it.

This impulse to *always engage* rather than *selectively avoid* is one reason I'm called in to coach executives on their behavior. It's one of the most common behavioral issues among leaders: succumbing to the temptation to exercise power when they would be better off showing restraint.

It's a simple equation: *To avoid undesirable behavior, avoid the environments where it is most likely to occur.*
Chapter 8: The Wheel of Change

4. Accepting

I spent two intensive days with Alicia and her team as they developed their new "seat at the table" strategy. Using the wheel of change as her template, Alicia told the team they only had to make four decisions: choose one thing to create, preserve, eliminate, and accept.

Part Two: Try

Chapter 9: The Power of Active Questions

Optimism - not only feeling it inside but showing it on the outside - is a magic move. People are automatically drawn to the confident individual who believes everything will work out. They want to be led by this person. They'll work overtime to help this person succeed. Optimism almost makes the change process a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Part of the problem, my daughter patiently explained, is that despite the massive spending on training, companies may end up doing things that stifle rather than promote engagement. It starts with how companies ask questions about employee engagement. The standard practice in almost all organizational surveys on the subject is to rely on what Kelly calls *passive* questions - questions that describe a static condition. "Do you have clear goals?" is an example of a passive question. It's passive because it can cause people to think of what is being done to them rather than what they are doing for themselves.

When people are asked passive questions they almost invariably provide "environmental" answers. Thus, if an employee answers "no" when asked, "Do you have clear goals?" the reasons are attributed to external factors such as "My manager can't make up his mind" or "The company changes strategy every month. The employee seldom looks within to take responsibility and say, "It's my fault." Blame is assigned elsewhere. The passive construction of "Do you have clear goals?" begets a passive explanation ("My manager doesn't set clear goals").

The result, argued Kelly, is that when companies take the natural next step and ask for positive suggestions about making changes, the employees' answers once again focus exclusively on the environment, not the individual. "Managers need to be trained in goal setting" or "Our executives need to be more effective in communicating our vision" are typical responses. The company is essentially asking, "What are we doing wrong?" - and the employees are more than willing to oblige with a laundry list of the company's mistakes.

There is nothing inherently evil or bad about passive questions. They can be a very useful tool for helping companies know what they can do to improve. On the other hand, they can produce a very negative unintended consequence. When asked exclusively, passive questions can be the natural enemy of taking personal responsibility and demonstrating accountability. They can give people the unearned permission to pass the buck to anyone and anything but themselves.

Active questions are the alternative to passive questions. There's a difference between "Do you have clear goals?" and "Did you do your best to set clear goals for yourself?" The former is trying to determine the employee's state of mind; the latter challenges the employee to describe or defend a course of action. Kelly was pointing out that passive questions were almost always being asked while active questions were being ignored.

The third group went to the same two-hour training session. Their training was followed up every day (for ten working days) with active questions:

- Did you do your best to be happy?
- Did you do your best to find meaning?
- Did you do your best to build positive relationships with people?
- Did you do your best to be fully engaged?

At the end of two weeks, the participants in each of the three groups were asked to rate themselves on increased happiness, meaning, positive relationships, and engagement.

The results were amazingly consistent. The control group showed little change (as control groups are wont to do). The passive questions group reported positive improvement in all four areas. The active questions group doubled that improvement on every item! Active questions were twice as effective at delivering training's desired benefit to employees. While any follow-up was shown to be superior to no follow-up, a simple tweak in the language of follow-up - focusing on what the individual can control - makes a significant difference.

Chapter 10: The Engaging Questions

- Did I do my best to set clear goals today?
- Did I do my best to make progress toward my goals today?
- Did I do my best to find meaning today?
- Did I do my best to be happy today?
- Did I do my best to build positive relationships today?
- Did I do my best to be fully engaged today?

Given people's demonstrable reluctance to change at all, this study shows that active self-questioning can trigger a new way of interacting with our world. Active questions reveal where we are trying and where we are giving up.

Testing, Testing on Me

For years I've followed a nightly follow-up routine that I call Daily Questions, in which I have someone call me wherever I am in the world and listen while I answer a specific set of questions that I have written for myself. Every day. For the longest time there were thirteen questions, many focused on my physical well-being, because if you don't have your health... well, you know the rest. The first question was always "How happy was I today?" (because that's important to me), followed by questions like:

- How meaningful was my day?
- How much do I weigh?
- Did I say or do something nice to Lyda?

As an experiment, I tweaked the questions using Kelly's "Did I do my best to" formulation.

- Did I do my best to be happy?
- Did I do my best to find meaning?
- Did I do my best to have a healthy diet?
- Did I do my best to be a good husband?

Suddenly, I wasn't being asked how well I performed but rather how much I tried. The distinction was meaningful to me because in my original formulation, if I wasn't happy or I ignored Lyda, I could always blame it on some factor outside myself.

Adding the words "did I do my best" added the element of *trying* into the equation. It injected personal ownership and responsibility into my question-and-answer process. After a few weeks using this checklist, I noticed an unintended consequence. Active questions themselves didn't merely elicit an answer. They created a different level of engagement with my goals.

Since then I've gone through many permutations of my Daily Questions. The list isn't working if it isn't changing along the way - if I'm not getting better on some issues and adding new ones to tackle. Here's my current list of twenty-two "Did I do my best?" questions that I review every day:

The point is, your Daily Questions should reflect your objectives. They're not meant to be shared in public (unless you're writing a book on the subject), meaning they're not designed to be judged. You're not constructing your list to impress anyone. It's your list, it's your life. I score my "Did I do my best" questions on a simple 1-10 scale. You can use whatever works for you. Your only considerations should be:

- Are these items important in my life?
- Will success on these items help me become the person I want to be?

A Distinction with a Difference

That's what makes *active* questions a magic move. Injecting the phrase "Did I do my best to...." triggers trying.

A few months later when I checked in with him, he described how the questions changed his life. Although he was healthy and in his forties, he had a wife and two sons who depended on him. It bothered him that he didn't have life insurance to protect his family. So he added the following to his daily list of questions: *Are you updated on your life insurance?* It wasn't much of a behavioral goal, more like a specific chore that he could do once and erase from his list. And yet...

For fourteen consecutive days, he answered the life insurance question with a "no."

Chapter 11: Daily Questions in Action

- She asked for help

Her next step was embracing the concept of active question to focus on *effort* rather than *results*. She would phrase her goals as "Did I do my best to..." rather than "Did I..."

One of the unappreciated benefits of Daily Questions is that they force us to quantify an unfamiliar data point: *our level of trying*. We rarely do that. We treat effort as a second-class citizen.

No Emily would have to come up with cooking and eating habits that went beyond the quick fix of juicing. She was entering a second phase of behavioral change, one where she was *creating* rather than eliminating. The old Daily Questions no longer applied. She needed to retool her goals into a plan that made sense for the rest of her life.

3. They highlight the difference between self-discipline and self-control.

Self-discipline refers to *achieving desirable behavior*. Self-control refers to *avoiding undesirable behavior*.

We reveal our preference for self-discipline or self-control in the way we phrase our Daily Questions. It's one thing to ask ourselves, "Did I do my best to limit my sugar consumption?" and another to ask, "Did I do my best to say no to sweets?" The former calls for self-discipline, the latter self-control. Depending on who we are, that subtle adjustment can make all the difference.

Daily Questions, by definition, compel us from our obsession with results (because that's now what we're measuring). In turn, we are free to appreciate the process of change and our role in making it happen. We're no longer frustrated by the languid pace of visible progress - because we're looking in another direction.

Daily Questions remind us that:

- Change doesn't happen overnight.
- Success is the sum of small efforts repeated day in and day out.
- If we make the effort, we will get better. If we don't, we won't.

Chapter 12: Planner, Doer, and Coach

Note: 2007 Book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*

Not long ago I worked with an executive named Griffin whose behavioral issue was adding too much value at work. If one of his people came in with a new idea, instead of saying "Great idea," he displayed an uncontrollable urge to improve it. Sometimes his contribution was helpful, other times questionable. The problem was, while he may have improved the content of the idea by 10 percent, he reduced the employee's ownership of the idea by 50

percent. He was stifling debate and creativity - and driving away talent. He was a quick study and with Daily Questions was soon awarding himself 10s for *not* adding value.

Chapter 13: AIWWATT

Am I willing,
At this time,
To make the investment required
To make a positive difference
On this topic?

It's Always an Empty Boat

The Buddhist wisdom is contained in the Parable of the Empty Boat:

A young farmer was covered with sweat as he paddled his boat up the river. He was going upstream to deliver his produce to the village. It was a hot day, and he wanted to make his delivery and get home before dark. As he looked ahead, he spied another vessel, heading rapidly downstream toward his boat. He rowed furiously to get out of the way, but it didn't seem to help.

He shouted, "Change direction! You are going to hit me!" To no avail. The vessel hit his boat with a violent thud. He cried out, "You idiot! How could you manage to hit my boat in the middle of this wide river? As he glared into the boat, seeking out the individual responsible for the accident, he realized no one was there. He had been screaming at an empty boat that had broken free of its moorings and was floating downstream with the current.

We behave one way when we believe that there is another person at the helm. We can blame that stupid, uncaring person for our misfortune. This blaming permits us to get angry, act out, assign blame, and play the victim.

We behave more calmly when we learn that it's an empty boat. With no available scapegoat, we can't get upset. We make peace with the fact that our misfortune was the result of fate or bad luck. We may even laugh at the absurdity of a random unmanned boat finding a way to collide with us in a vast body of water.

The moral: there's never anyone in the other boat. We are always screaming at an empty vessel. An empty boat isn't targeting us. And neither are all the people creating the sour notes in the soundtrack of our day.

- The colleague who always interrupts you in meetings. He thinks he's smarter than everyone, not just you. Empty boat.

I like to make this point in leadership classes with a simple exercise. I'll ask a random audience member to think of one person who makes him or her feel bad, angry, or crazy. "Can you envision that person?" I ask.

A nod, a disgusted face, and then, "Yes."

"How much sleep is that person losing over you tonight?" I ask.

"None."

"Who is being punished here? Who is doing the punishing?" I ask.

The answer inevitably is "Me and me."

I end the exercise with a simple reminder that getting mad at people for being who they are makes as much sense as getting mad at a chair for being a chair.

4. When discussions don't go our way.

Another Peter Drucker quote changed my life. I tell it to everyone I coach, some would say over and over again: "Every decision in the world is made by the person who has the power to make the decision. Make peace with that."

But it's also a reminder about power: decision makers have it, the rest of us don't. Sometimes the decision makers' choices are logical and wise, other times irrational, petty, and foolish. That doesn't change the fact that they are still the decision makers.

We go through life grumbling about *what should be* at the expense of accepting *what is*. Within that bubble of delusion, we grant ourselves an autonomy and superiority we have not earned.

If this is your issue - habitually disagreeing with a decision - AIWATT blesses you with the simplest of cost-benefit analyses: *Is this battle worth fighting?* If your answer is no, put the decision behind you and plant your flag where you can make a positive difference.

Part 3: More Structure, Please

Chapter 14: We Do Not Get Better Without Structure

No idea looms bigger in Alan's mind than the importance of structure in turning around an organization and its people. I believe that the Business Plan Review (BPR) process that he has developed is the most effective use of organizational structure that I have ever observed.

Chapter 15: But It Has to Be the Right Structure

- Where are we going?
- Where are you going?
- What is going well?
- Where can we improve?
- How can I help you?
- How can you help me?

Chapter 16: Behaving Under the Influence of Depletion

What's going on here? Why do our discipline and decisiveness fade at the end of the day, to the point where we opt to do nothing instead of doing something enjoyable or useful? It's not because we're inherently weak. It's because we're weakened.

The social psychologist Roy F. Baumeister coined the term *ego depletion* in the 1990s to describe this phenomenon.

Structure is how we overcome depletion. In an almost magical way, structure slows down how fast our discipline and self-control disappear. When we have structure, we don't have to make as many choices; we just follow the plan. And the net result is we're not being depleted as quickly.

Chapter 17: We Need Help When We're Least Likely to Get It

The Awful Meeting

For example, imagine that you have to go to a one-hour meeting that will be pointless, boring, a time-suck better spent catching up on your "real" work. (We've all been there.) You have no interest in masking how you feel about the meeting. You walk in sporting a sullen look on your face, signaling that you'd rather be anywhere but here. You slouch in your chair, resisting eye contact, doodling on a notepad, speaking only when you're called on, making perfunctory contributions. At meeting's end, you're the first one out the door. Your goal was to spend the hour being miserable - and you succeeded.

Now imagine at meeting's end you will be tested - just you - with four simple questions about how you spent that hour:

- Did I do my best to be happy?
- Did I do my best to find meaning?
- Did I do my best to build positive relationships?
- Did I do my best to be fully engaged?

If you knew that you were going to be tested, what would you do differently to raise your score on any of these four items?

I've posed this question to thousands of executives. Some typical responses:

- I would go into the meeting with a positive attitude.
- Instead of waiting for someone to make it interesting, I'd make it interesting myself.
- I'd try to help the presenter in some way instead of critiquing him in my head.
- I would come prepared with good questions.
- I would challenge myself to learn something meaningful in the meeting.
- I would try to build a positive relationship with someone in the room.
- I would pay attention and put away my smartphone.

Here's my radical suggestion. From now on, pretend that you are going to be tested at every meeting!

Chapter 18: Hourly Questions

You answer your Daily Questions each night and gradually reap the benefit many months later. It's not an overnight religious conversion. You're playing a long game.

Hourly Questions are for the short game - when we require a burst of discipline to restrain our behavioral impulses for a defined period of time.

Chapter 19: The Trouble With "Good Enough"

2. When we're working pro bono

The takeaway: Pro bono is an adjective, not an excuse. If you think doing folks a favor justifies doing less than your best, you're not doing anyone any favors, including yourself. People forget your promise, remember your performance.

3. When we behave like "amateurs".

"At work I have to be professional," he said. "Your feedback taught me that."

"And what about home?" I asked. "It's okay to be an amateur with your family?"

4. When we have compliance issues.

These are three random examples from our hundreds of small daily acts of disobedience and letting people down. Most of us don't notice our episodes of noncompliance, although we quickly spot them in others. It's the other guy who breaks a confidence, or litters, or texts while driving. Not us. We would never do that.

The takeaway: When we engage in noncompliance, we're not just being sloppy and lazy. It's more aggressive and rude than that. We're thumbing our noses at the world, announcing, "The rules don't apply to us. Don't rely on us. We don't care." We're drawing a line at good enough and refusing to budge beyond it.

Part 4: No Regrets

Chapter 21: The Circle of Engagement

The first objective is awareness - being awake to what's going on around us. Few of us go through our day being more than fractionally aware. We turn off our brains when we travel or commute to work. Our minds wander in meetings. Even among the people we love, we distract ourselves in front of a TV or computer screen. Who knows what we're missing when we're not paying attention?

The statement *I just need someone to talk to* is a trigger - a trigger for Jim to stop what he's doing and *listen*. He's not being asked for his opinion or help. He's not being asked to say anything at all. Just listen. It is the easiest "ask" of his day. He should cherish it as an unexpected gift.

Chapter 22: The Hazard of Leading a Changeless Life

We are willfully choosing to be miserable and making others miserable, too. The time we are miserable is time we can never get back. Even more painful, it was all our doing. It was our choice.