

LEADERSHIP, LEARNING & ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

The Eighth Habit: Making It Stick

The quick solutions, easy answers and shortcuts are insufficient for effective change.

By Leo M. Tonkin

In the early 1990s, while working with the Covey Leadership Center and teaching *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, I saw firsthand the power of the entire Seven Habits framework - from Be Proactive and Begin with the End in Mind to Put First Things First, Think Win-Win, Seek First to Understand, Synergize, and Sharpen the Saw. But I also kept seeing the same challenge: **understanding a principle is not the same as living it**. People could attend the training, learn the language, understand the concepts - and still return to familiar behaviors. For me, that was the missing piece. I began referring to it, in my own work, as **"the eighth habit"**: the discipline of integration - turning principles from something we know into something we practice, and ultimately into part of how we naturally think, lead, and work.

That is what *Making It Stick* is really about.

"There is a tremendous distinction between doing something and being something."

— Leo M. Tonkin

The question has always been the same.

Organizations are constantly introduced to new ideas, new language, new systems, new training, and new expectations. Meetings are held. Workbooks are distributed. Vision statements go on the wall. People learn the terminology.

And then comes the more difficult question: **How do you make it stick?** How do you get it integrated? How do you really know if it is working?

The question is not limited to training. It applies to change, strategy, leadership, communication, culture, and any new knowledge we expect people to carry into the way they actually work.

THE EXECUTIVE QUESTION

Information is not integration.

There is a tremendous distinction between **doing** something and **being** something. One can dance by counting the steps and going through the motions, or let the movement flow. One can deliver lines on cue, or become part of the character. One can paint by the numbers, or develop the eye and hand of an artist.

By following instructions, remembering the formula, and using the techniques, we can learn how to do something. Initially, that may be exactly what is required. But significant, fundamental change occurs only when the doing is transformed into being.

That happens as a process. There are no simple solutions, right answers, or universal "how-to" formulas. The process will differ for each individual and organization, but several principles recur.

THE DISTINCTION

Doing is the application of a technique. Being is when the capability has become part of how you naturally operate.

Mastery is a process, not an event.

Progress rarely moves in a straight line. Mastery tends to occur in brief spurts of progress followed by a decline to a plateau - often a plateau higher than the one before it.

In sports, the arts, leadership, and business, the pattern is uneven. The spurts vary. The plateaus have peaks and valleys of their own. To move toward mastery, one has to train regularly, practice diligently, and receive useful coaching and feedback.

The inevitable fact is that we spend more time on the plateau than we do experiencing dramatic progress. We have to keep practicing even when it appears that nothing is happening.

The plateau is not evidence that the process has stopped. It is often where the process is becoming integrated.

Our attraction to instant results works against this. We are surrounded by promises of faster, easier, immediate improvement. Mastery asks for something different: persistence when there is no immediate reward.

What happens when progress slows?

When the first burst of progress gives way to a plateau, people respond in different ways. I have long described three familiar patterns: the Rookie, the MVP, and the Hobbyist.

THE ROOKIE

Loves beginnings. Brings tremendous enthusiasm to something new. But when the first plateau appears, motivation drops and another new path suddenly looks more attractive.

THE MVP

Does not accept the plateau. Pushes harder, forces outcomes, and looks for shortcuts to keep the results moving. Short-term gains can come at the expense of sustainability and relationships.

THE HOBBYIST

Becomes comfortable on the plateau. Does enough to get by, but avoids the discipline, feedback, and continued development required to move to another level.

These categories are not neat labels. A person can be a Rookie in one area, an MVP in another, and a Hobbyist somewhere else. The same patterns can describe teams, departments, and entire organizations.

A sales team may resemble the Hobbyist while senior management operates like the MVP. Marketing may be chasing the next new idea while operations is patiently building mastery. The point is not to categorize people. It is to notice the relationship we have to progress, practice, and the plateau.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL LENS

How an organization responds when improvement is no longer exciting tells you a great deal about whether change will actually endure.

Being in training vs. being trained.

Many organizations approach training from the assumption that something is wrong and needs to be fixed. Training is treated as something that will provide what people do not currently have - and once they "get it," the training is complete.

Imagine an athlete, dancer, actor, or musician saying they were already trained. If you were preparing to compete at the highest level, when would your training end? It would not.

There is a big distinction between being in training and being trained.

The first describes an ongoing process. The second sounds like an end state. Goals, milestones, and measurements still matter, but when training is understood as part of an ongoing process, resistance decreases and learning can have a much greater impact.

Change is not the problem. Our relationship to change is.

Change challenges comfort, creates uncertainty, and can threaten our sense of control. It makes the familiar unfamiliar. And in the face of uncertainty, people naturally reach for familiar ground.

Yet change also puts people back at ground zero together. It can create commonality, learning, and a new basis for collaboration. When systems, procedures, and processes shift, it is often not the change itself that creates the greatest disruption, but our reaction to it.

As people change their own behavior, another challenge appears: everyone around them may continue relating to the person they used to be. Shifting other people's perspective takes patience, persistence, and communication.

THE DISTINCTION

The status quo is simply yesterday's change that has become familiar.

Practice is what turns learning into habit.

Practice requires persistence, patience, repetition, and rigor. It does not work by osmosis. Skills and habits are developed over time, and the greatest challenge comes when practicing appears to produce little or no immediate result.

This is where the attraction to the quick solution becomes strongest. We quit, switch approaches, or assume we have already mastered something that still requires practice.

The Bamboo Principle

The original article used the familiar story of a bamboo tree that requires years of nurturing before visible growth appears. Whether taken literally or as metaphor, the leadership lesson is useful: **invisible progress is still progress.**

The person who understands the process continues to provide what is necessary. The impatient observer judges only what can be seen today.

The greatest challenge occurs when practicing produces little or no immediate result.

Realistic expectations, milestones, routines, and consistent practice create the conditions in which capability can become habit.

Measure the result - and the actions that produce it.

Organizations need accurate measures for the factors that matter: productivity, performance, financial results, service, quality, engagement, and other outcomes relevant to the business.

Most organizations track end results. But an end result tells you what happened. It does not necessarily tell you what produced it.

- 1 End results**
What happened? What outcome was achieved?
- 2 Actions**
What behaviors, routines, decisions, and processes produced the result?
- 3 Adjustments**
If the result is off, what specifically needs to change?

THE FEEDBACK DISTINCTION

There is a big difference between measuring results and measuring the actions that produce the results.

Effective feedback also depends on clear expectations, useful milestones, the right timing, and the right people. Managers and employees often assume they are operating from the same understanding when they are not.

Feedback delivered by the wrong person, at the wrong time, or without a relationship of trust can damage performance rather than improve it. Measurement is not simply a reporting system. It is part of the learning system.

Action is what makes the habit real.

Too much time is spent creating the right circumstances, waiting for the right information, or planning for the perfect moment to begin. The key is to start where you are and progress from there.

Procrastination, urgent-but-not-important matters, and constant interruption can stifle the process. Training activities, feedback sessions, and implementation work must become actual priorities in the calendar.

Schedule priorities rather than prioritize schedules.

Action occurs in time. A plan that never enters the calendar is still only an intention.

The real work is integration.

Once we shift our perspective of change and growth, we can design ways to integrate new learning into daily and weekly practice. Clear action plans, specific milestones, useful feedback, and repeated application create the conditions in which new habits and new levels of performance can emerge.

Organizations also have to be willing to examine the paradigms and processes that have brought success in the past. What worked before may not be what allows the organization to move forward now.

When people are genuinely encouraged to learn, innovate, risk, participate, and contribute, they become more authentically engaged in accomplishing the goals and mission of the organization. But that engagement requires more than information. It requires an environment that supports practice, implementation, feedback, and continued learning.

THE LEADERSHIP IMPERATIVE

Commit beyond enthusiasm. Stay through the plateau. Build the practices, feedback, and routines that allow learning to become the way the organization works.

By the way, you can teach an old dog new tricks. Who said it was going to be easy?

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Founder & Principal, Distinctions, Inc. Leo advises CEOs and leadership teams on leadership, culture, organizational transformation, strategy execution, and the people side of performance. His work draws on decades of experience as an advisor, consultant, coach, facilitator, entrepreneur, and operator.

A habit is not information remembered. It is something practiced often enough to become part of how we operate.