

Structures for Success

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Structures By Design

An associate recently described how she had installed a radar detector in her car and set it at the highest sensitivity level possible. At that level, the alarm is so sensitive that it goes off when a car with a garage door opener is nearby, not only in the presence of police radar. She does this to create a frequent reminder to check her driving speed and she soon noticed that she was driving within the speed limit more often than when she first started practicing this new habit. The structure worked to remind her of her intention to slow down, stay under the speed limit and avoid getting any more costly traffic tickets.

There are many creative approaches to developing supporting structures for changing habits—timers, post-it-notes on the computer monitor, buzzers, gold stars on calendars. One person I know places his car keys in the refrigerator on top of the healthy food he has prepared for the day so he will not leave home without it.

The problem with structures arises when they become a burden and defeats the purpose we were aiming for.

Overloaded Structures

I was puzzled by the difficulty I was having in sticking with my intention for a balanced life when my coach observed that I had old structures holding my old habits in place and I had just added new structures on top of the old. No wonder it just felt heavier!

I had a structural conflict: one set of structure supported working long hours and pushing myself hard and I had just added another structure supporting my intention to balance work with the relationships, activities and rest that are also important to me. Without removing the old structures, the new ones could not thrive.

Before I could de-construct the old structures, I had to identify them. The deeper I dug the more ingrained I found the structures to be in my belief system, my daily routine, my habits and my perspective.

The behavior I wanted to change was supported by a lifetime of choices, one on top of the other, piled up to my eyebrows, keeping me right where I thought I did not want to be. These beliefs and behaviors were so much a part of me, it was only through an objective observer that I was able to separate them out and examine them.

Structural Anchors

The anchor holding my destructive structure in place was a belief I have carried around for most of my life that I 'should' work hard. It is not easy to let go of that—it has served me well in my career—and there is decades of habit that springs from that belief.

I also recognize that part of my personal history is success in changing old habits and developing new behaviors and perspectives. I began exploring my past successes for clues about how to

achieve the breakthrough I now wanted to achieve. I began my inquiry by asking: ***What has worked for me in the past?***

One of my most important life changes was when I quit my two-pack a day smoking habit. In that situation, I used the structure of group accountability to help me get started. Six of my co-workers joined me in a resolution to quit smoking on New Year's Day and knowing that they were in this adventure with me helped me stay focused on my success.

When, at the end of the first week, I was the only one of the seven who had not yet had a cigarette, my structure shifted from group accountability to determination to be the sole winner in this contest of wills. My competitive nature kicked in and I had to succeed where others had failed.

I also created a celebration for achieving milestones along my path to non-smoker. When the old habit tempted me, I had a reward in mind to give me the extra dedication I needed to resist the temptation.

History Lessons

When I need to be reminded of my wish to lead a balanced life, I seek support from those I know who share that goal, tapping into that group accountability that worked well for me before. I have learned that the act of reaching out for support breaks the cycle of over-achieving and helps me to focus on the new habit I want to acquire. Besides that, I hate to admit defeat when I have set a goal; my competitive trait kicks in again and I resolve to become the most balanced person around.

I hope this question will start you thinking about your personal history lessons: ***What do your past successes tell you about reaching your goals now?***

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