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Beyond Self-Addiction *Tap into three sources of strength.*

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I've seen hundreds of people go to leadership training. They often rave that it's a life changing experience; they speak of the program and presenter in reverent tones; they spend considerable time and money in training, and yet they don't make changes in their behavior or performance.

Here's the truth: People aren't very good at changing. I think it's because we don't know how. We may believe that change is a matter of willpower and say: If you want to make significant changes to your behavior, you can—if you have sufficient willpower. If, on the other hand, you lack the internal drive or conviction to see your efforts through, you will fail.

Yet even with willpower, you likely struggle to make changes. You read books, attend training, go to conferences, and convince yourself that you'll learn and implement important lessons. You learn new models of behavior for leadership, communication, decision-making, and conflict resolution—but then what happens?

You go back to your office. There are 200 emails and a stack of work waiting for you. A new project comes along. You get sick. Your kid makes the all-star team. You go on vacation. A team member leaves to go to a competitor. Soon you fall back into old patterns of behavior, and the desired change drifts away.

You know **what** you'd like to do differently or better. The challenge is that you don't know **how**. Once you know what you'd like to do differently, how do you stop the old behaviors that have developed over decades? How do you get out of the old, ingrained routines and start and sustain the new ones?

Self-Addictions

I call our commitments to our old routines and our ineffective behaviors self-addictions. In effect, we are addicted to ourselves. We may want to change, but our old behaviors have a hold on us. We are much like addicts—stuck in our old routines with no clear way to get out.

Some of these self-addictions are undesirable behaviors like being overly critical, aggressive or antagonistic. Your self-addiction could be talking too

much, procrastinating or thinking too many negative thoughts. However, self-addiction isn't always about getting rid of a bad habit.

Self-addiction also applies to the commitments we have to our current routines that prevent us from starting new, positive behaviors. Maybe you want to be more patient, ask more questions or listen more. Perhaps you want to provide more positive feedback, take more risks or communicate a more compelling vision. The challenge of breaking a self-addiction applies to any change you are trying to make, whether you are trying to get rid of an old behavior or introduce a new, positive one or both.

Many people seek simple solutions to the complex challenge of behavior change. They read books that promise easy answers to such challenging tasks as leading teams, communicating clearly, losing weight, making marriage or parenting rewarding.

These things aren't easy, but in our instant gratification society, we want the microwave solution. We want to believe we can have the changes we want without putting in the effort.

The important changes that you make are not easy, but they can be done if you know how. Your routines, your ingrained behaviors have been reinforced thousands of times. To break the hold they have on you, you need to make the powers pushing you toward your new behaviors even stronger than the ones pulling you back to old ones. To break behavior patterns, you need to find ways to be strong.

Three Ways to Be Strong

There are three key ways you can do this:

1. Raise awareness. The first step to making a successful change is to remember what it is you want to change. Any commitment you can tuck away in a drawer and never look at again will fade away and disappear. If you consistently remind yourself of your goal it will be more likely to come to your mind in the moment when you need to change your behavior.

A visual reminder of your commitment can be a powerful aide. I suggest writing it down and putting it somewhere you will see it and read it at least once per day. You can put it on your bathroom mirror, dashboard, or desk or make it your screensaver. One of my more eccentric clients taped his goal to the wall above the toilet paper roll in his bathroom. The key is to remind yourself everyday at least once per day. The more you do this, the more likely you will be to remember to change your actions in the moment.

2. Build support. Building Support is about getting people to help you in your efforts to change. Most people try to go it alone in their development efforts. They keep their goals to themselves. You may not want anyone to know what you're working on, especially if what you're working on is that you talk too much, or you are too aggressive or, conversely, a pushover. "It's private," you may tell yourself. What you fail to recognize is everyone already knows. They're probably already talking about it, too, just not with you. We all know the issues of the people around us.

We get embarrassed or afraid of failure or uncomfortable asking for help, but there are tremendous benefits if you do ask for help. Your supporters can give you feedback, perspective, encouragement, accountability. The simple truth is that it's easier to change with help. Think about some of the organizations that have figured this out: Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers. They have long used peer accountability and support to help their members change.

Your supporters can play a variety of roles. Here are just a few:

- The Informer – gives you feedback on your progress
- The Thinker – helps you think of plans and strategies to shape your new behavior
- The Actor – takes action in the moment to help you change your behavior
- The Supporter – cheers you on and offers encouragement
- The Challenger – pushes you to higher levels of achievement

3. Take action. Sustained change requires concrete strategies and specific actions that guide new behaviors. If you are told by team members, friends, managers, or spouses that you need to change certain behaviors, you may try and fail, especially if the only success strategy you have is to “try harder.” This approach rarely works. You need real strategies to shape the behaviors you want to create.

For example, suppose that you want to be less critical, but you have a natural gift for recognizing errors and problems in any situation. You need to build your skill in seeing the best parts in the people and opportunities around you. So, you might carry a notepad with you to meetings and write “What’s working?” at the top of the pad. This simple action can change your mindset. Some times it reminds you to stay positive. Other times you might use the “What’s working?” question to start conversations. Instead of trying harder, you embrace a new action that encourages the desired behavior.

These three sources of strength can fortify you to achieve whatever personal or professional development goal you set. Good luck and keep the change.

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