How Habits Hone Consumer and Employee Behavior

Reviewed by Jenna Wyatt

The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business


Duhigg notes that there is not a unique secret formula in the science of habit. Different triggers motivate different habits, thus: “As a result, this book doesn’t contain one prescription. Rather, I hoped to deliver something else: a framework for understanding how habits work and a guide to experimenting with how they might change.” He identifies a framework for changing habits that all individuals can gain power over it. A habit is not an easy task, but once a habit’s operation is understood, changing habits work and a guide to experimenting with how they might change. Duhigg would note this as an important value within Alcoa, the hope was that each employee transferred that value into their everyday life. Alcoa learned, much like Starbucks, that simply changing a habit can change the way a company operates. And O’Neill’s subsequent prominence in corporate America led to his appointment as U.S. Secretary of the Treasury in 2001 – where he proved all over again his independent streak.

Starbucks has a craving to please their customers and this reflects through their customer service. Duhigg accounts his interaction with Travis, an employee who climbed from a high school dropout to a Starbucks barista and finally to the manager of one of two Starbucks locations. Because of a lack of self-discipline, entry-level retail employees are inevitably set up to fail without proper training programs. So how is it that Starbucks is able to take high school dropouts and transform them into successful managers? Travis states that Starbucks changed his life through teaching him willpower that his upbringing failed to develop. Because of the company’s training programs, Starbucks has been classified as one of the nation’s largest educators. Each Starbucks employee participates in Starbucks’s classrooms that focus on willpower, self-discipline and how they can each be successful employees. Originally, Starbucks sponsored weight-loss classes and gym memberships, hoping that those good habits would flow into their work life, but when that proved to be unsuccessful, they created their current training program.

Starbucks teaches their employees to respond to specific cues through instilling in them certain habits and routines for nearly any scenario they may encounter each day. “We’re not in the coffee business serving people — we’re in the people business serving coffee. Our entire business model is based on fantastic coffee business serving people...we’re in the people business!”

Many customers seem to go to Starbucks for the experience, not for the coffee. As I noticed most recently one morning at 6 a.m. on a busy corner of Park Avenue and 34th Street in Manhattan, many customers rush into the store, only to be slowly down marked by an employee takes interest in them. During my morning at Starbucks, I watched an employee aid an older woman who was unable to carry her drink. By carrying it for her, I watched regular customers walk through the doors to friendly greetings by employees who seemed to recognize them. The availability of free Starbucks wifi has only increased the home office from home pace of many stores. While waiting for my coffee, I observed a cohesive staff behind the bar, preparing food and drinks, laughing, and having fun. Duhigg would note this excellent example of Starbucks bringing together customers and employees of all backgrounds together over coffee and happiness. Their noteworthy training program means a great deal to the future of labor in general. Starbucks has empowered its employees to become better workers through utilizing the “habit loop,” ultimately creating an enormous return on their generalized training programs.2

1 O’Neill was fired as Treasury Secretary after just two years, at least in part for his public questioning of the tax cuts of the George W. Bush Administration. See Ron Suskind, The Price of Loyalty: George W. Bush, the White House, and the Education of Paul O’Neill (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2004).


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