

A horizontal green bar at the top of the page contains a white swirl icon on the left side. The text "Digging Deep to Break Old Habits" is centered in the bar in a white, bold, sans-serif font.

Digging Deep to Break Old Habits

by Adam Reynolds – Executive Consultant and Coaching Program Director

We've all struggled to break habits that no longer support our goals. Whether it's smoking cigarettes, or hitting snooze too many times, we've all been there. Most habits are formed at an unconscious level to serve some positive purpose. We didn't purposefully decide to start biting our nails, but we did it because it relieved some stress or anxiety; we didn't decide we wanted to start checking our work emails on the weekends, but somehow that habit was formed - perhaps it was to try our best to keep up with everything coming at us, to be a good teammate, or because responsiveness is highly valued in our business culture. When we try to break a habit, we find ourselves battling the positive purpose stored in our unconscious mind. The key to changing our behavior is uncovering what caused the habit to form in the first place - a particular mindset.

A common practice among busy leaders is to accept multiple meeting requests for the same time slot. Obviously one person cannot attend three meetings at once, yet clearly there was a reason behind the development of this behavioral pattern. What mindset lies behind this behavior? There are many possibilities, maybe they don't want to miss out on anything, maybe they're trying to validate the importance of each meeting request thus ensuring employees feel valued. Maybe it's as simple as procrastination; they don't want to have to make a decision at the moment. Most often it is that they're hedging their bets, assuming one or two of the meetings will be cancelled or rescheduled and they'll be able to attend the remaining one. The bottom line is, each of these behaviors has a down side; a decision about which meeting they will attend is often left to the last minute, leaving others expecting them to attend only to find out at the time of the meeting that in fact they won't be joining. This has a ripple effect on team productivity, causing rescheduling, delayed decision making, wasted cycles of action, and emboldens reactive behavior across the culture.

Once we start examining the personal motives behind a habit and the costs of continuing to repeat it, we can start to break the pattern. To do this, we need to cast doubt on the value of the old behavior, recognize its impact, and find the positive purpose that has kept the behavior intact. Doubting the value of the old behavior loosens its hold on us and opens us to the possibility of a new idea or mindset that will serve the situation better. This new mindset must be strong enough to overcome the old one, otherwise we will go back to our old ways. You may tell yourself you're going to work out every morning, but when it comes time to get up and go to the gym or lace up those running shoes, you decide to grab your phone and check email or social media. After a few minutes goes by engaging your old habit, you find yourself lost in that pattern yet again. Maybe you are able to will yourself to work out a few days in a row, but your willpower won't last and soon your old mindset will regain its place.

Humans are motivated in two directions: *towards* something we want or *away from* something we want to avoid. If we are to have any hope of changing an old unwanted habit, we have to give ourselves a good enough reason to make the change. Sometimes it's a desire to run a marathon or a worrisome test at the doctor's office that gets us moving in the right direction. Either way, motivation is key. Taking our meeting request example, what would motivate someone to change that behavior? A discussion with a colleague might do it. One of your colleagues shares the uncomfortable impact your behavior is having on your team. She says, "the team feels challenged to get time with you, and when you accept a meeting only to decline it at the last minute, they begin to feel that their agendas are not important and direction from you is lacking." You may also find that you are drowning in meetings, and this leads you to focus on accepting the meetings that are most strategic to your business initiatives. With the new mindset of being strategic versus responsive, you begin to see each meeting request through a new filter, transforming your relationship to your calendar.

Breaking old habits and forming new ones is a personal endeavor. The first step is uncovering what mindset, value or belief formed the habit in the first place. The second step is recognizing that this value may not be the most important one in driving your behavior. Digging deep, you can find a new motivator that is strong enough to support practices that are in alignment with your goals.