



A Failure of Willpower

Why do intelligent people so often act in ways which they know are inappropriate or not how they would prefer to act?

- The manager who loses her temper under pressure and shouts at someone who has made a mistake – even though they know that will not improve future performance.
- The employee who puts off the monthly report to the last minute - even though they would far prefer to work on it step by step during the month.
- The smoker or dieter who has that one cigarette or biscuit - even though they know that once they start they will consume the whole packet.

We are all familiar with the feeling that sometimes there are two of “us”, one driven to an unthinking and automatic response and another suggesting we stop, think about it and do what we know is the wiser course. We also know that most of the time (and almost always when we are under pressure) the wiser version of “us” is trampled underfoot. The really frustrating part is that we can often predict with some accuracy when we are going to get it wrong, why it is wrong, what would be our preferred course of action – and then we still go ahead and do the wrong thing anyway!

When working with managers and executives in a coaching role it is tempting to think that once they understand the behaviour that is causing difficulty then the problem is nearly solved i.e. surely once they understand what they are doing wrong they will simply correct it. In fact they often already have an intuitive if not complete understanding of what they are doing, they just cannot override their automatic and “natural” responses. Despite the coaching and the improved understanding the issue remains!

As is so often the case the difficulty these problems cause usually intensifies once someone is placed in a leadership role. Things that could be forgiven or do not have an impact beyond one or two people become magnified by the positional authority invested in the leadership role and are no longer able to be tolerated. By this stage in the person’s career many of these poor behaviours have become well established and deeply ingrained automatic responses, and some of them may even have served the person well in previous roles.

Why is it so difficult to countermand the “automatic” us?

You would think that once the required change was clearly understood by someone that it would be relatively easy to override these automatic and unproductive actions.

Unfortunately they usually have significant power over us for a number of reasons

- There is usually an enticing short term pay off attached to our automatic responses – the cigarette delivers a nicotine hit, shouting relieves a build up of aggression, delaying the report avoids attending to a lot of frustrating detail.
- We have usually implemented them over years for thousands of repetitions – we are very comfortable with them and they are a handy default response, particularly when our conscious mind is consumed by dealing with a difficult or anxiety provoking situation
- We often do not know we are doing them until after the fact - our actions bypass “conscious thought” and are not examined at the time
- People do not understand and have the practiced skills and tactics needed to break the habits of a lifetime

Where a leader is exhibiting poor behaviours, and continues to do so even after they have been pointed out to them, the response should not be to condemn them for a lack of willpower or intent to change.

We need to provide them with the insight and tools to recognise these behaviours before or as they are happening and also equip them with some skills to do something about it.

As it is for strategy, 90% of the task is in the implementation!