

Break Free: The Big Payoff from Kicking the Habit



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Leaders are guided and inspired by the missions and values of the organizations they serve when they are called on to balance risk and reward in programming. And when it comes to the toughest choices, most leaders go with their gut. But what if your gut is leading you astray? Without realizing it, decisions about what risks to avoid, embrace or work-around may be influenced first and foremost by intrinsic beliefs, habits and dangerous assumptions.

Everyone holds certain beliefs about the world, including perhaps, that one type of fizzy soft drink is obviously better than another. And although some of us boast about being risk takers and drawn to experimentation and trying new things, humans are creatures of habit. However, when intrinsic beliefs and habits affect workplace decisions, from hiring help to heating the office, you might want to review your behaviors and check your assumptions and habits at the door.

Risky Habits and Erroneous Assumptions

Stop Judging People Based on How They Appear – While packing for a trip I asked my daughter if she thought anyone would notice that one of my boots was a bit scuffed up. “Should I pack something else?” I asked. She replied: “I don’t think anyone notices footwear on old people.” After realizing that her reference to “old people” meant me (!), I pondered her theory that people don’t notice what you’re wearing or the condition of your shoes. I’m not sure that’s true. Although we’ve been told over and over not to “judge a book by its cover,” many leaders are guilty of making snap and erroneous judgments about someone’s competence based on what they look like.

Turn up the Heat! – Each Spring, disputes about the office thermostat begin to decline. Since I’ve always assumed that being a bit chilly is conducive to critical thinking, I use my executive veto power during the winter months to keep our office temp at a refreshing 65 degrees. Yet according to a study shared by one of my bundled-up colleagues, warmer workers make fewer typing errors and are generally more productive! (See: “Warm offices linked to fewer typing errors, higher productivity,” Cornell Chronicle.) Oh, dear.

Stop Coveting Your Neighbor’s Framework – One of the most prevailing assumptions related to risk management practice is that “editing” another entity’s risk management framework, system, or policy is faster

than creating something from scratch. During NRMCM's 30+-year history our team has reviewed countless examples of ill-fitting frameworks and policies. One of our favorite examples is a ten-page policy on absenteeism for an entity with fewer than 10 employees. Cut and paste gone very, very wrong.

Focus on Tomorrow, Not Yesteryear – When I was a child I vowed that I would never begin a sentence with “when I was your age...” But I’ve broken my vow countless times during arguments with my daughter. The problem with dispensing advice based on a foggy memory of the past is twofold: first, our brains often remember things in a way that suits our current needs or wants. Second, although there’s nothing wrong with nostalgia, yesterday’s problem-solving strategy is likely to be a poor fit for today’s reality.

Inspire Learning – One of the most common, but risky assumptions in the workplace is that to perform a job well you need prior experience doing something similar. I recently encountered this assumption while working on a screening process for a client. My client expressed his preference for candidates with similar experience in a similar agency. While I understood the risk-averse logic of that view, I pushed back: isn’t it possible that hiring the most creative, brilliant applicant is preferable to hiring someone who’s been there and done that? And what about the incredible satisfaction of watching a colleague take on a new, complex project and perform well above your expectations? There are few experiences as satisfying for a manager.

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