Risk Managers Must Learn to See What's Already There. Here's How.



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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I recently finished a fascinating book on the power and perils of something all humans experience: habituation. In *Look Again: The Power of Noticing What Was Always There*, Tali Sharot and Cass R. Sunstein encourage readers to seize and embrace mini breaks to regain the sensitivity to things we've simply stopped noticing. If you've ever stood up from your workstation to take a walk to clear your head, you're familiar with the potency of a mini break.

According to Sharot and Sunstein, those mini breaks are more than simple R&R for our overloaded brains; they are powerful jolts that help us see and understand what we've been missing. The authors explain "when something surprising or unexpected happens, your brain will respond strongly. But when everything is predictable, your brain will respond less, and sometimes not at all."

For me, a simple example is reading this on my screen. Every day I read and re-read and edit and correct content. But when something is truly important, I print it out and read it sitting at my desk, away from my screen. Whenever I do that I find typos and other errors I missed during my on-screen review.

How to Harness Habituation

The authors share several nuggets on how to understand and work with habituation as you manage risk and life.

First, "…on average you will be happier if you alter a situation you are thinking of changing: the very fact that you are considering it implies that your current situation is not ideal." Wow. If you are even *thinking about* changing something in your personal life or at work, the oddsmakers are pointing you to make that change.

Second, if you're expecting a change to be amazing or horrible, you're just human. They write that "When making changes, people think about how they will feel immediately following the change and much less about how they will feel months later" and explain that this means humans "both overestimate the joy of a welcome change and the horrors of an uncomfortable or scary one."

Third, when it's time to focus on an unpleasant task, don't delay and don't try to multitask. Avoiding breaks facilitates habituation, which in turns makes even an unpleasant task or assignment feel less so. Time to focus

on proofreading that mega-spreadsheet without distractions!

Does it Feel Risky? Risk and Feelings are Inseparable

Are you less afraid of familiar experiences? If yes, you are human! Human beings calibrate risk based on past experience; if we have traversed the same, narrow, windy road through Loudoun County, VA hundreds of times, we are less fearful of winding up in a ditch. But when we travel the roads in my community for the first time, visitors seem surprised that the 45 MPH signs permit drivers to travel "that fast."

We learn from experience, but often the learning is warped. The authors of *See Again* write that "The general phenomenon—'scared by the new, bold with the old'—is an outgrowth of risk habituation. As the new and unfamiliar risk becomes old hat, people may treat it as smaller than it actually is." The authors point us to this powerful, always timely lesson: "If you want to dishabituate people to a certain risk—your teenage son, your employees, yourself—you need to 'shake it up,' adding that "Change the environment, change the rules, *surprise* people, and habituation will break."

Risk Tips for Human Habituators

Habituate sensibly. Make training focused on core risk topics—cyber security, youth protection, and travel safety—familiar, focused and frequent.

Use surprise strategically. When we mix things up and inject surprise into a routine, the human brain pays attention. New information about an emerging risk? Don't bury the headline in a routinely sent newsletter. Open the town hall meeting with an attention-grabbing headline.

Savor the signals. Whether it's a social movement or operational practice that has outweighed its usefulness, the spark for change often comes from a human who "does not entirely habituate—who is uncomfortable with some practice, or some situation, and who is willing to say or do something about it." Tune in! When it feels like something must change, it probably should.

Question assumptions. Humans use data and experience to stay safe. If we expect the roads will be slick after it rains, we will drive slower and brake gently. We also use learning and experience to shape our forecasts. But learning and experience can also lead to stereotypes, generalizations and bias. We consciously and subconsciously lean on experience to judge. And in many cases, we are wrong.

The opportunity to see things anew is one of the most rewarding aspects of being a human capable of cognitive change. And it will make you a better risk manager. Don't wait—start practicing these tips to become less habitually habituated today.