Exploring your habits

We all have habits. Some good, some not so good. Some are important habits, some not so important. But we all have them. Do you have the same routine every morning when you wake up? Is there an order you do things in? What about when you get to work? Do you park in the same place, check your email first or always take a coffee break at 10.30? When you get home do you automatically put on your running shoes and go for a run (a good habit!) and do you run the same course all the time? Or when you get home do you sit down on the couch with a drink and watch TV (a bad habit!).

Perhaps some of your habits have been dictated to you by the way your employers set things up! Maybe your home routines are dictated by family commitments and you’ve fallen into an efficient and non-thinking way of dealing with them.

Research has shown that around 40% of the decisions we make everyday are made unconsciously\(^1\). We do not need to think about hundreds of decisions – that’s because they are habits. It’s the body’s way of helping us cope with ordinary life. Taken individually most habits do not have much meaning. But collectively and over time, they dictate much of our behavior – what we eat, how much we exercise, how we go about our work. This has an enormous impact on our health, our productivity, our financial security and well-being.

Individuals have habits and organisations have habits. The collection of habits is what forms culture over time. Think about your sports club. Can you recognize routines at your club? Have things been done a certain way for a long period of time? Are there unwritten ground rules for certain things?

Have you ever thought about how those habits form in the first place? If we understand how habits form then we are in a much better position to change them. Let’s have a look at how habits form in our brain.

Think about your brain as an onion! It has layers over layers. The outside layers are where all the action happens. It is where your most complex thinking occurs and where you make conscious decisions. When you are trying to solve a problem or listening hard to understand what someone is saying, then your outer layers kick in and decipher these messages. In the inner layers, near where the brain meets the spinal column, is an area that dictates our more automated behaviours, such as swallowing and breathing. When you get to the center of the brain you’ll find a lump of tissue

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known as the basal ganglia. This is the area of the brain that neuroscientists attribute to storing your habits.

Basically, the basal ganglia converts a series of actions into an automatic routine and then stores these behavioural 'chunks' for later use. This is the core of how habits form. This is pretty useful – as it saves us a lot of effort as our habits kick in, meaning we can turn our thoughts to other things by using the outer layers of the brain while, for example, making a cup of coffee.

Neuroscientists have identified a three-step loop\(^2\) that explains how the basal ganglia does this. The first part is the **cue**, which basically acts as a trigger for your brain, telling it which routine to set in motion. The **routine** is set in motion – the routine can be physical, mental or even emotional. Then there is the **reward**. If the reward is strong enough – it doesn’t have to be very strong – then the **habit loop** is formed and becomes more and more entrenched in the basal ganglia over time as patterns are repeated.

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In the example above what type of routine might Homer slip into?

The cue for Homer is the TV coming on. The routine is that Homer settles on the couch with a beer and the reward is that Homer feels happy and content. This is probably not a habit loop that Homer wants to change!

So, how is this important for inclusion?

It’s very important. Successful inclusion is about translating good attitudes into action. Inevitably this means challenging and changing the status quo. Doing something different. Changing habits. The vast majority of people are fully supportive of inclusion. They want to see more people getting involved in sport – people from different backgrounds, people with disabilities, people from different cultures. But translating these positive attitudes into action is sometimes a problem as people do not recognize the behaviours that are excluding people in the first place – the unconscious habits.

The other ‘challenge’ is that there is no secret formula to habit change. We all have different habits and different contexts. The good news is that it is possible to change an existing habit and create new habits. Throughout the 7 Pillars we will help you do this.

What are good inclusive habits? Here’s a few just to get you thinking:
• One person in the club has a responsibility for inclusion and it’s a habit to invite him/her to all meetings;
• At the same time there is an acceptance that all people in the club have a responsibility for inclusion and to create welcoming environments for all people;
• It’s known and expected that at any important or public meetings/events there will be a ‘welcome to country’;
• People routinely use person first terminology when referring to people with disability;
• There’s an expectation that all coaches will coach all athletes in their group and will get assistance when/if needed;
• The club routinely invests in new technologies, equipment and upgrades facilities to attract a more diverse membership;
• A circle of friends is established with local community groups and a schedule of events is delivered each year to forge and foster partnerships;
• The club has systems and strategies in place, which are regularly reviewed, to tackle issues of discrimination and harassment.

Of course, habits are often quite personal and specific to your own daily routines. So what are your habits? Which ones are important and do you need to change some to make your routines more inclusive?