



# Leadership NOTES

## The Anatomy of a Habit

“First we make our habits, then our habits make us.”  
(From *Success- One Day at a Time*, by John Maxwell, 2000).



Willpower is overrated. Many administrators, often people of strong will and a history of accomplishment, lean too heavily on their own personal will and power to implement change. And why not? School administrators are success stories. They have overcome obstacles, delayed gratification, balanced family and career, obtained advanced degrees, and climbed the ladder. It is understandable that they would continue to lean on these attributes as they assume the role of change agent. Willpower is certainly necessary, especially in the early stages of personal or school change. Willpower is not, however, sufficiently long-lasting to embed the elements and behaviors of change into the fabric of the organization so they become consistent and widespread.

Consistent, widespread, long-lasting...these are products of habit, not willpower. According to Charles Duhigg, author of *The Power of Habit- Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business*, “The key to exercising regularly, losing weight, raising exceptional children, becoming more productive, building revolutionary companies and social movements, and achieving success is understanding how habits work.” (Duhigg, 2012, from book jacket).

As educational change agents, it is helpful to understand how habits can complement willpower to produce positive, sustainable improvement. The Anatomy of a Habit, is a model for understanding how habits are successfully built and maintained to the great benefit of educators and schools.

## Anatomy of a Habit:

Trigger. During a habit's formation, before it operates at the subconscious level, it must be repeated consciously. A trigger is a signal that shifts the behavior decision from the subconscious to the conscious level. For example, a runner might place her running shoes next to her alarm clock. When the alarm sounds, the shoes trigger the runner to consciously make the run/no run decision.

Meaningful Thought. After a trigger causes the shift to consciousness, an M-thought is a pre-planned best argument for making the right decision. Keeping with the running example, the runner might imagine how great it feels to sprint the final 100 yards to finish an early morning run.

Accountability. It is positive to the habit building process to keep track of progress. Write it down, chart it, graph it, or journal it. Written accountability keeps us honest and motivates future actions.

Celebration / Artifact Creation. As milestones are met, it helps to reinforce the new habit with regular celebrations, recognitions, gold stars, ribbons, etc. Celebrating a milestone and/or creating an artifact to commemorate incremental successes build confidence and a sense of efficacy.

There you have it... The Anatomy of a Habit: **Trigger + M-Thought + Accountability + Celebration**

Author's Note: *The Anatomy of a Habit* is adapted from the Missouri Leadership Development System (MLDS) Developing Level Facilitation Guide- Mike Rutherford, Lead Author, copyright 2017 by Rutherford Learning Group, Inc., Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MoDESE), and the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO).