6½ HABIT GURUS
WHAT THE SMARTEST PEOPLE ARE TELLING US ABOUT THE SCIENCE AND ART OF BUILDING NEW HABITS

MICHAEL BUNGAY STANIER
SENIOR PARTNER
BOX OF CRAYONS
The Coaching Habit gives you seven essential questions and the way to make asking them an everyday habit.

Master them, and you’ll work less hard and have more impact.


And more than 100 senior leaders from organizations ranging from A(DP) to Z(ürich Financial) have said this is the best coaching book for time-crunched managers and leaders.

Box of Crayons has given more than 10,000 busy managers the tools to coach in 10 minutes or less through their award-winning programs. The Coaching Habit shares that important wisdom.

Learn more at www.TheCoachingHabit.com and download your free chapters.
YOU’VE GOT TO USE IT, USE IT …

In *The Coaching Habit* I share the seven essential questions that can make life easier, more meaningful and more effective for busy managers and leaders.

I love these questions, and having taught more than 10,000 managers how to work less hard and have more impact in our training programs, I know that they work. When they’re used.

And that phrase, “when they’re used,” is paramount.

Because most managers know that, in theory, they should coach their people regularly. But in practice? Their core management behaviour looks more like this ...

KNOWING THE QUESTIONS ISN’T ENOUGH

This, from Henry Hazlitt in Thinking as a Science:

“The only way we could remember would be by constant rereading, for knowledge unused tends to drop out of mind. Knowledge used does not need to be remembered; practice forms habits and habits make memory unnecessary. The rule is nothing; the application is everything.”

This report is all about that practice and application.

Now, there’s much out there in the world about habit building that is, simply put, wrong. The most egregious example is the “Do it for 21 days and it becomes a habit.” No, no, no.

The good news is that there’s an increasing body of work drawing on psychology, behavioural economics and neuroscience that tells us what does work. Here are the six (and a half) people who I think have the most important things to say.

(And don’t forget to check out the videos on page 24. You’ll see zombies, monkeys and at least one egg ... a fun take on how to build rock-solid habits.)
MEET OUR GURUS*

07 | CHARLES DUHIGG: GET TRIGGER-HAPPY
17 | LEO BABAUTA: ONE ON ONE

09 | NIR EYAL: KA-CHING!
19 | DAN COYLE: DEEP DIVE

12 | JEREMY DEAN: BREAKING BAD
22 | COACH.ME: FINISHED

15 | BJ FOGG: THE MINUTE MAN
24 | BONUS VIDEOS: ZOMBIES! MONKEYS!

*While I love the work of the people here, I’m also very aware that this is not a diverse list. So who have I missed? Who are the women and people of colour that I’ve missed? Drop me a line and tell me.
Charles Duhigg is a New York Times journalist, which explains why his book The Power of Habit is engaging, practical and full of good stories and science. (If, for instance, you’d like to know how to disperse an imminent riot or learn tactics for having a hit crossover song, this is the book for you.)

One of Duhigg’s key findings is that a habit is not simply a behaviour, but rather a three-part system. He calls it the habit loop:

A trigger: the cue to behave a certain way, the situation that sets off the habit.

The behaviour: the routine you have, the thing you do.

The reward: why your brain says, “Oh yeah, next time, do it again!”

For building your coaching habit, identifying the trigger—the circumstances that initiate the old habit—is key. By taking us here, Duhigg resets where we need to start thinking about building a new habit.

Don’t start with the routine. Start with the trigger.
In other words, unless you’re aware of what sets you off, you’ll be halfway down the path of the old behaviour you’re trying to change before your conscious mind even starts to kick in to exclaim, “Wait, how did I end up in the kitchen eating a tub of ice cream? Again?!?”

The more specific you can be about identifying your trigger moment, the more useful a piece of data it is.

Here’s what I mean. Let’s say you’re trying to build a new habit about not rushing in to share your advice at the weekly team meeting.

As a trigger, “at the team meeting” becomes more helpful when it’s narrowed to “when I’m asked for advice at the team meeting.”

An even more usable version would be: “When Jenny asks me, as she always does, for approval or feedback on her idea in the team meeting.”

With that degree of specificity, you have a targeted starting point for developing a strong, new habit.

THE THING TO REMEMBER

Figure Your Trigger. If you don’t know what sets off the old habit, it’s almost impossible to change it up to a new habit.

If you’d like to learn more about Duhigg’s work, you can hear my interview with him here.

@CDuhigg

You can pick up Duhigg’s outstanding book The Power of Habit here.
NIR EYAL: KA-CHING!

Charles Duhigg mentioned rewards as the third part of the habit loop. It’s the thing that, after you’ve done the habit, makes your brain go: “Oh yes, we’ll be doing THAT again.”

Nir Eyal goes a little deeper in his book *Hooked: How to Build Habit-Forming Products*. It’s a book that focuses mostly on Silicon Valley, and just why things like Facebook and FarmVille have billions of people checking their gadget on a daily, hourly, minute-ly basis.

Eyal digs into the concept of rewards, and cashing in on the ever-growing field of neuroscience, and discovers a subtle and important twist on how rewards work. We don’t actually want the sensation of receiving the reward, whether it’s a “like” on Facebook or a piece of chocolate. What we want is to alleviate the craving we feel for that reward.

And that makes complete sense as soon as we remember those people we’ve seen joylessly smoking or miserably working a slot machine in Vegas. It stopped being about the pleasure a long time ago.
So how does this make sense of why we love to give advice, and why staying curious and asking questions is so difficult? The craving we have, the itch we need scratched, is to be in control. Because when you’re giving the answer—even if it’s solving the wrong problem, even if it will be ignored, even if it’s wrong—you get to be in control.

When you ask a question, however, you’re in a less comfortable place. It’s a place of ambiguity: Was this a good question? What will they say? Will they give the answer you’re hoping for? Will you be able to respond? Asking a question is an empowering act for the person you’re asking, but it’s a disempowering act for you. Now they’ve got control of the conversation.

Eyal goes on to tease apart the three types of rewards you can experience:

**The Tribe**: rewards that make us feel accepted, attractive, important and included.

**The Hunt**: rewards that bring us physical objects and supplies that help us to survive.

**The Self**: rewards that fuel intrinsic motivation as we grow and gain mastery.
So weigh up the different rewards you get from giving advice against those from staying curious and being more coach-like.

I can imagine that telling someone what to do brings the reward of the Tribe: look how important and useful you are.

But how interesting to notice, when you now frame your job as helping someone learn rather than teaching them, that coaching someone not only brings the rewards of The Tribe, but also the rewards of The Self. Reframing and understanding more deeply the potential rewards may encourage and support you to change your behaviour.

THE THING TO REMEMBER

We keep doing our habits—good and bad—because of the rewards we get. Get clear on the reward you’ll get for moving from your current habit (giving advice) to your new habit (staying curious, asking questions, being coach-like) to help embed the habit.

@NirEyal

You can pick up Nir’s intriguing book Hooked here.
Jeremy Dean’s blog PsyBlog is a bridge between science and life. Looking to do (and not do) things to be happier, healthier and more effective? PsyBlog is where you’ll find tactics with the evidence to back them up.

In Dean’s book Making Habits, Breaking Habits, there is a chapter devoted to breaking bad habits. And who doesn’t have one or two of those they’d like to change? (No need to confess exactly what your bad habits—it’s probably enough to know we’ve all got them.)

And most of us have a lousy track record of trying to break those bad habits and do things differently. New Year’s resolutions is one obvious marker, and Dean quotes a study that shows that by January 8 almost 25% of us had abandoned our resolutions to eat/sloth/sulk/check email less. And that was probably under-reporting the truth of the matter. There’s a reason why January 21 is considered the most depressing day of the year. December’s credit card bill arrives and our resolutions are finally dead and buried.

So what works?
Well, here’s what doesn’t work. Willpower. Gritting your teeth, clenching your fists and muttering “I will not succumb.” Our willpower, it turns out, is a precious and limited resource. Once it’s used up, it’s gone until replenished, and once it’s used up, we’re in even greater danger of succumbing to the various temptations we’re trying to resist.

Ironically, we tend to default to willpower because we’re almost all overconfident about how well we can change our habits. This time, I’ll start going to the gym regularly. This time, there will be no chocolate binges. This time, I won’t get wound up by my mother. Pffft.

And piling on the irony, don’t think that simply suppressing the bad habit is going to work. The more you try to push the bad habit out of your mind, the more it pops up. It’s like trying not to think of the white bear.
Dean suggests two related strategies for moving forward. First, he acknowledges the power of mindfulness. Mindfulness—being aware of what you’re doing minute by minute—is almost the exact opposite of a habit. Building your awareness of what you’re doing now (and now, and now) helps you see and perhaps avoid those bad habits.

Second, he makes clear that you need to not just eliminate an old habit but create a new habit. Dean puts it like this: “You can’t just dam the river because the water will rise up and break through. Instead, you need to encourage the river to take a different course.”

Of course, the New Habit Formula in *The Coaching Habit* uses this very structure, so you’re identifying both the old habit you want to discard and the new habit you want to create.

If you think you can get rid of a bad habit just through grit, willpower and strength of character, you’re almost certainly overconfident. Deluded. Wrong. Getting rid of a bad habit requires a dash of mindfulness, and a new habit to fill in the gap.

You can pick up Jeremy’s rigorously researched book *Making Habits, Breaking Habits* here.
As the Director of the Persuasive Technology Lab and the creator of the TinyHabits.com website, Dr. BJ Fog has spent decades thinking about how to modify behaviour.

One of Fogg’s key insights is that as soon as we try to create a big habit—let’s say, going for a run in the morning—our big brains immediately start finding ways to “hack” our well-intentioned plan. It doesn’t take much, as you’re lying in your warm bed, to think of all those excellent reasons why today (just today, of course; tomorrow I’ll be good, I promise) you can’t go for that run.

Fogg says that the secret is to define a first step that takes less than sixty seconds to complete.

This step aligns strongly with Getting Things Done productivity guru David Allen’s insight that you can’t do projects, you can only do “the next action.” What Fogg is telling us is that we need to define the first step—the micro-habit—of the larger habit we want to build.
The example Fogg often quotes is his desire to floss his teeth. We’ve all had that moment, sitting in the dentist’s chair, when the hygienist asks us in a rhetorical sort of way how our flossing is going.

_Gaaaaaaaagh_, we reply, which translates roughly to “I’ve flossed ninety-three times this week and I’m hoping that makes up for zero times in the previous six months.”

Fogg broke this cycle by committing, after brushing his teeth, to floss just one tooth. It’s hard to find a good excuse to say you don’t have time to floss just a single tooth. And you can guess what happened after that. With one tooth done and the floss wrapped around his fingers and ready to go, he finished flossing all of his teeth.

So make your new habit specific, granular and accomplishable in a minute or less. For example, if you want to build a habit to do some thinking first thing in the morning, don’t just say, “I plan to do some strategic thinking.” Articulate a habit to walk into your office and sit with a sheet of paper and pen (and no computer) at your desk for a minute.

**THE THING TO REMEMBER**

Define your new habit to take less than one minute. This micro-habit is much harder to hack (i.e., find an excuse not to do). Think of it like coming out of the starting blocks really strongly at the start of a 100m sprint.

If you’d like to hear more about what BJ Fogg is up to, you can hear my interview with him [here](https://example.com).

@BJFogg
LEO BABAUTA:
ONE ON ONE

Leo is the quiet genius behind one of the most popular blogs in the world—ZenHabits.net—and the book of the same name. He’s one of the nicest men around, and while I’m sure that hasn’t changed since he quit smoking on November 18, 2005, lots of other things have.

Leo has not only stayed a non-smoker but has also lost a bunch of weight, become a vegetarian and then a vegan, run several marathons, eliminated debt, embraced meditation, removed clutter from his life, continued as a husband and father to six children, and pretty much ticked off the most common and the most commonly broken New Year’s resolutions. (I know this all makes him sound like he might be a righteous and morally superior prude whom you wouldn’t want to actually know, but truly he is a lovely guy.)

Leo takes a stand that’s at odds with some of the other “gurus” here, but it’s one that has clearly worked for him: focus on creating just one habit at a time.
That’s harder than it sounds. We’ve all had those moments when you want to declare, “All change! Starting today I want to go to bed earlier, eat less sugar, eat more vegetables, exercise more, be more generous, call my mother regularly, stop checking Facebook obsessively, hug my children, write a book, and declutter the house.” And if you try to do all of that at once, you end up failing at everything.

Leo says, “I would estimate that you triple or even quadruple your chances of success if you focus on one habit at a time … Devote all of your energy to that habit change, and once it’s on autopilot, move on to the next one. Knock ’em down one at a time.”

It’s hard to say No to those things you want to say Yes to, even when it’s more subtle things like changing some established behaviours. But, as the proverb has it, “If you try to catch two rabbits, you’ll end up catching neither.”

In The Coaching Habit, the broad habit we want you to adopt is to asking questions. Leo’s advice would say to pick one of the seven questions—the one you think will make the most difference to your ability to work less hard and have more impact—and focus on making that a specific habit.

Go build 64 new habits at once. Don’t even try to build three new habits. Pick one, and really focus on it. If you’re picking a question from The Coaching Habit, my suggestion would be to start with #2: The AWE Question.

If you’d like to hear Leo talking about how he’s used his insights into habit building to create a simple and happy life, you can hear that conversation between him and me here.

@Zen Habits

You can pick up Leo’s excellent book Essential Zen Habits here.
Where does talent come from? Answering that question was the genesis for Dan Coyle’s terrific book *The Talent Code*, and the research for it took him to talent hot spots around the world: a rundown court in Moscow that produced extraordinary women tennis players; the Juilliard School, home of world-class musicians; the Caribbean, a baseball talent factory; and plenty of other places besides.

It turns out that the answer is neurological and that its name is myelin. Myelin is something like an insulator and accelerator of our brain’s connections. The more myelin you have “wrapped” on the neural pathways for a particular action, the faster and better you’ll do that action. Talented people have hard-wired the precise patterns of behaviour that lead to success in their chosen fields.

So how do you get yourself some of that myelin? Coyle identifies three drivers, one of which is deep practice. It turns out that Aristotle had it only mostly right when he said, “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence is therefore not an act but a habit.” He’d missed an essential part of the story.
Were you ever encouraged or forced to practice something as a child? For me it was scales on the piano. Every morning on our termite-infested piano (that’s another story), I’d trundle my fingers up and down in a largely mindless exercise. The wheel was spinning, as they say, but the hamster was dead.

That’s practice.

*Deep* practice is much more deliberate and mindful. It has three core elements.

**Identify and isolate** a key building-block skill. In tennis, for instance, you don’t practice the serve; you practice just one key element, such as throwing the ball up in the air.

**Mindfully practice** that skill. Do it faster, do it slower, try it out until you really understand it.

Start to **feel the success**. After you’ve defined your new habit, learn what it’s like when you’re doing this new habit well, rather than doing it approximately.
So how do you take that insight into habit building?

As an example, if you’re wanting to be a better listener, the difference between a half-hearted attempt and deliberate deep practice on listening is immense.

In Deep Practice mode, you might focus on just the first sixty seconds after you ask a question; you might experiment with different ways of sitting, of breathing, of moving or holding still, or of managing eye contact. And you’ll begin to get “in your bones” what complete, focused listening feels like.

Bottom line? A few good minutes of deep practice trump any number of minutes of half-hearted practice.

Practice smart. Practice deep. If you want to build a new habit (and of course you do,) don’t just define it. Practice it mindfully, thoughtfully, deeply.

If you’d like to hear Dan going deep into the science of talk, you can hear our conversation here.

You can pick up Dan’s practical book The Talent Code here.
COACH.ME: FINISHED

Here’s the “half a guru.” There is, as they say, an app for that, and it turns out that there are many, many apps that are designed to help you build and strengthen good habits.

As a tip of this iceberg, I’ve used and enjoyed:

WonderfulDay (app), where its inspiration is Jerry Seinfeld’s method of productivity, and its strength is its simplicity.

Strides (app), which has a particularly friendly interface to track a range of types of habits and goals.

Beeminder.com (website), which helps you track your progress towards goals and so is particularly useful if you’ve got a target you’re moving towards.

Stickk.com (website), which puts your money where your mouth is when it comes to accountability. Don’t forget the double K in the name.

What I learned from talking to Tony Stubblebine, the creator of the Coach.me app, was the power of finish lines. In short, how will you know when you’re done? What does success look like?
It’s an obvious point as soon as you hear it, but too often, attempts to build a new habit fall victim to what Tony calls “the treadmill effect.” Things get boring. And when bored, you can get distracted. And when you’re distracted, you can revert to your old ways.

Defining success—which might be anything from doing your new habit a certain number of times per day or week, doing it until a certain date, or hitting some sort of metric—allows you to stop, celebrate and recalibrate.

A mundane and recent example that will be familiar to anyone in sales is the process of tidying up our database. Over the years, Box of Crayons accumulated thousands of names. It was a mess: now we weren’t exactly sure who anyone was, even if they were still alive. The commitment I created was to review a hundred entries a day (it was perfect brain-dead afternoon work), with success being that every entry had at least three “tags” explaining who the person is and how we know him or her.

Continually defining finish lines keeps you fresh, and allows you to keep celebrating successes as you cross them. With success comes motivation for the next level, and a deeper foundation for your new habit.

THE THING TO REMEMBER

Find a finish line, so you can cross it with your arms held high. Create lots of smaller challenges, rather than one endless one that never quite ends.

If you’d like to learn more about how the leading app makers are helping people build strong habits, you can find my interviews with Tony Stubblebine of Coach.me, Kyle Richey, founder of Strides, and Ian Ayres, founder of Stickk, here.

@CoachDotMe
BONUS VIDEOS: BUILDING ROCK-SOLID HABITS, PARTS 1—3

A three-part series of videos using monkeys, zombies and an egg, all to help reinforce what you already know about building

HOW TO BUILD ROCK-SOLID HABITS PT 1

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HOW TO BUILD ROCK-SOLID HABITS PT 3
FINDING THIS USEFUL? WHO ELSE MIGHT LIKE TO SEE IT?

THANKS FOR SHARING IT. HERE ARE THREE WAYS TO SPREAD THE WORD:

EMAIL THIS LINK TO A COLLEAGUE OR TWO, SO THEY CAN DOWNLOAD THE REPORT

TELL YOUR LINKEDIN COLLEAGUES YOU’VE FOUND SOMETHING COOL

SHARE SOME TWEET LOVE AND THIS LINK

If you enjoyed this, you might also enjoy our report The Three Essential Coaching Habits of the Time-Crunched Manager. You can access your copy here.
If you understand the importance of having your managers be more coach-like and are frustrated with solutions that haven’t worked, then contact us now.

Box of Crayons is a training company that gives time-crunched managers the tools to coach in 10 minutes or less.

Headquartered in Toronto, Canada and with faculty in North America and Europe, we offer these three programs:

- Coaching for Great Work
- The Coaching Habit
- Last Feedback Workshop

“The feedback I received from the team was that this wasn’t your typical training session. They didn’t receive a large binder of course material or be subject to Death by PowerPoint. It was simple, easy to understand, easy to use concepts and a lot of interaction during the course itself. Our Sales Management Team is made up of individuals with varying backgrounds and tenure. There wasn’t a single participant that came back and said that the training wasn’t relevant or that they didn’t see where they could use it on a daily basis working with their own team. This will become part of the way we manage the business going forward.”

Peter Ronan – VP Direct Sales, Ricoh Canada

“What participants said was, “I now have something I can put in practice this afternoon.” You know, the challenge sometimes is the concept is good in theory... but I have no idea what to do with it. With this program, I can go to my next meeting and use these new skills and I will probably get a different result.

This is not your grandmother’s coaching workshop. People said that it felt fresh and contemporary. It felt different and simple and practical and relevant. And they honestly didn’t expect that”

Stacey Porter – Director Talent Development, Intuitive Surgical
Michael is the Senior Partner and Founder of Box of Crayons. Box of Crayons helps organizations around the world do less Good Work and more Great Work. Their training programs give time-crunched managers the tools to coach in 10 minutes or less.

Michael is the author of a number of books, including the bestselling *Do More Great Work*. His book and philanthropic project *End Malaria* collected essays by thought leaders around the topic of Great Work, and through its sale raised $400,000 for Malaria No More.

He’s also a popular speaker, and as well as speaking at such organizations as Google, GSK and TD Bank is constantly top ranked at conferences such as HRPA, Evanta, The Conference Board of Canada and CSTD.

As an Australian, he’s surprised to find himself living in Toronto, Canada. However, as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University his only real success was falling in love with a Canadian (and now wife of 20 years). So that explains that.

George Orwell said, “an autobiography is only to be trusted when it reveals something disgraceful.” Bearing that in mind, Michael was banned from his high-school graduation for “the balloon incident”, left Law School being sued by one of his lecturers for defamation, and managed to knock himself unconscious while digging a hole as a labourer.
THANK YOU

IF YOU’D LIKE TO CONTACT BOX OF CRAYONS:

BoxOfCrayons.biz
416 532-1322
Info@BoxOfCrayons.biz

LINKEDIN GROUP:
Tools for the Time Crunched Manager

YOUTUBE:
BoxOfCrayonsMovies

IF YOU’D LIKE TO CONTACT MICHAEL:

EMAIL:
Michael@BoxOfCrayons.biz

TWITTER:
@BoxOfCrayons

LINKEDIN