

Free Yourself from Damaging Associations

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2009, published in the *Houston Home Journal* on April 25, 2009

We all have unconscious “associations” that influence our behaviors. Some are constructive. They have no negative side effects, and they actually help you make it through every day. For example, when you finish breakfast, do you have an urge to brush your teeth? Does an occasional glance at that family photo on your desk remind you why you devote so much time and energy to your work?

Ah, but not all associations are beneficial. Some lead to detrimental outcomes. For example, aren't there certain circumstances that seem to trigger your anger to flare up? When something goes wrong, do you somehow just start looking for “who is to blame?”

Anger and blame are two of the common triggers that many leaders face. Where do we learn these behaviors? And once we recognize their detrimental effects, how can we change them?

I can't even answer that first question with certainty for me, though I've tried. I don't like the way anger pops out of me in surprising ways sometimes. Even when I realize what's happening, it's hard to stop.

The same is true with “blame.” Blaming others and blaming myself accomplishes nothing of value. If a mistake was made, let's figure out how to make it right and prevent it in the future. There's no need for anyone to suffer punishment. Yet how often do you punish yourself? Do you have to “feel bad” for awhile? Do you beat yourself with a little verbal abuse?

So maybe you've been wondering where your negative associations originated. Determining the source is not really necessary. Isn't improving those automatic associations what you really want? Anthony Robbins, in his “Personal Power” training series, offers a solution that I know works. I've seen it in myself and in others!

First, decide that your behavior must change. No one else can decide that for you. It has to be your decision. And it can't be that you just want it to change. Wishes don't work. You have to decide that it must change--that your former behavior is no longer tolerable!

Decide also that only you can change it. Your boss can't change it. Your spouse can't change it. There are no magic wands or special potions. Only you can change your undesirable response.

Third, believe you can change it. Sometimes you want to change, but deep down you don't believe it's possible. Henry Ford said, “Whether you think you can or think you can't, you are right.” Making a physical change requires work on your mental outlook. Imagine deeply the future outcome you desire, and know that you can make that change happen!

Once you've established those three prerequisites, become more aware of your pattern of response. Your desire is to interrupt that pattern. Do you recognize the trigger that sets you off? Find a creative way to break the cause and effect relationship that has been established. Can you throw water on yourself? Leave the room? Take an imaginary trip to a tropical island? Ask for a brief “time out”?

Now, find a substitute for the former behavior. Try something new that is more likely to lead to a desirable outcome. This may take some experimentation until you can find a different action that will allow you to build a repetitive pattern. Practice. Build a new habit. Find a colleague who will celebrate with you. Congratulate yourself each time you execute the new behavior. Imagine it being even easier next time!

It will take work to anchor in that new response. Once you do, your confidence in your ability to break negative associations will soar. You are not a Pavlovian drooling dog! You have the ability to break any conditioned reflex, realizing that there are many options available for responding to any situation.

Every leader has both strengths and limitations. Dennis helps leaders capitalize on their strengths and minimize the effects of their limitations. Contact Dennis at dhooper2@juno.com, or call 478-988-0237.