

---

# Seven Behaviours for Boosting Change Readiness



By Liana Burtsava , INSEAD Guest Lecturer and Entrepreneur-in-Residence

**Resistance to change is baked into our biology, but the ability to overcome it can be strengthened with the right regimen.**

When you change your mind, you change your habits. When you change your habits, you change your life.

When Greek philosopher Heraclitus said “the only constant is change” about 2,500 years ago, he could not possibly envision the radical pace of change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Today’s rate of technological development creates exponential change in all areas of our life, including the way business is conducted. Business leaders’ ability to survive – and thrive – directly correlates to their ability to adopt new skills, stay on top of technological advancement and the latest business practices, as well as adjust to the changing demands from employees and customers.

In a way, it is the new survival of the fittest.

How can we get better at embracing change? A relevant concept here is what psychologist Carol Dweck calls “growth mindset” – the belief that a

given attitude or attribute can change provided we put our mind to it. Dweck calls the opposite way of thinking “fixed mindset”. Of course, people with a generalised growth mindset – who believe in the possibility of change – will be more likely to take risks or put in work in order to achieve change. The best way to distinguish growth-mindset people from their fixed-mindset peers is to observe their response to failure. The former will be more apt to see setbacks as a challenge to learn from, while the latter will regard them as evidence of their inadequacy.

Decades of scientific research show that having a growth mindset is an asset. And yet, for most people, stepping out of one’s comfort zone seems more difficult than following Nike’s slogan, “Just do it”. I admit I didn’t always have a growth mindset and would often forego opportunities if there was a risk of failing or being seen as incompetent.

So why do so many of us find it difficult to invite meaningful change into our lives? Why are people reluctant to quit an unfulfilling job, launch a new business or even learn a new skill?

Let’s take a look at the roadblocks of change.

### **Why “Just do it” doesn’t always work**

It turns out, a lot of our resistance to change is determined by our biology. In our brain, the amygdala, a subcortical area of the brain linked to intense emotional arousal, is programmed to detect potential threats and react to them. Part of that reaction is the release of the “fight or flight” hormone cortisol. Note that there is no option to “go with the flow” in response to perceived danger. We are built to see threat as an unacceptable state of affairs.

Of course, not all changes are actually threats. Quite the contrary: As mentioned above, some may be necessary for our long-term flourishing. Yet scientific evidence shows that the fewer actual threats we’re exposed to, the more we tend to interpret unfamiliar stimuli as threatening. Modern society, with all its lulling conveniences, may conspire with our nervous system to foster change aversion.

Another possible contributing factor is our conditioning. This includes the beliefs and attitudes towards success, failure and ourselves that were typical of the environment we grew up in. Now ingrained, they often operate at the

subconscious level.

While understanding what blocks us is the first step towards success, it is important to devise strategies to “hack” our biology and conditioning, so we can deliberately lean into the growth mindset.

Below I’ve outlined seven effective behaviour- and mindset-related recommendations that I developed while running my business and working with clients.

### **1. Keep your eyes on the long-term goal**

The key strategy is to be 100 percent clear on why we want to introduce certain changes in our life. For example: “I am learning to be a public speaker because it will help me become a better communicator at work.” If we outline a roadmap and include incremental goals, it will be clear that small challenges are just stepping stones towards the big goal.

**Practice:** One way you can begin to implement this strategy is by adding the word “because” at the end of your goal statements. This will clarify which goals are relevant and specific and which ones need to be revisited.

### **2. Breathe through discomfort**

When we venture into the unknown, our body releases cortisol and we feel emotional discomfort. The key is to acknowledge discomfort, ask ourselves if we really are in danger or if this is simply the amygdala overreacting. In such case, allow it instead of resisting it.

**Practice:** Going for a walk or taking several deep breaths oxygenates the brain and makes the emotion fade away.

### **3. Reframe your language about failure**

Sometimes, failing simply means you need to look for a different solution. Silicon Valley’s “Move fast and break things” motto reflects a culture of disruption, fast iteration and growth.

**Useful reframe:** Describing his multiple attempts to create the lightbulb, Thomas Edison famously said, “I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.”

### **4. Get uncomfortable - on purpose**

Psychologists say that if we deliberately do things we are uncomfortable with, like cold-calling a potential client or seeking feedback, we become confident in our ability to overcome challenges. When Steve Jobs was 12 years old, he cold-called Bill Hewlett of Hewlett-Packard, asking him for spare parts for the project he was working on. As a result, he not only received spare parts, he also got an [internship at HP](#).

**Take action:** What is one thing you can do today to lean into discomfort and add to your growth-mindset toolbox?

## 5. Seek feedback

Dominic Barton, the former Managing Director of McKinsey & Company, forged a culture that not only welcomes feedback but also mandates it. Barton says that [he was able to gain valuable insights](#) on his leadership style from employees who had only been with the firm for a short amount of time.

**Practice:** Make a list of five people that you would like to gather feedback from, whether on a professional or personal basis. Most likely, patterns will emerge from that feedback, providing insight into your core strengths and areas for improvement.

## 6. Set deadlines and tell people about your goals

As soon as we tell someone we are committing to do something, we are more likely to carry through with this project to avoid embarrassment. In my early days at Toastmasters, I scheduled my talks on the public speaking club's agenda. This prevented me from finding excuses to not attend meetings as I didn't want to let people down.

**Practice:** One way to be accountable is to join a mastermind or peer group.

## 7. Integrate change, celebrate success

When we deliberately create change in our life, we create a new reality. It is important to take time to let it sink in. Eventually, our brain will reward us with a sense of accomplishment and a surge of dopamine.

**Take action:** Celebrating our triumphs with friends creates positive reinforcement.

Applying these seven strategies will almost certainly induce growth pains. But if we stick with it, we can gain mastery over our mind, minimise self-imposed limitations and become more likely to succeed in business and life in general.

**Liana Burtsava** is an INSEAD Guest Lecturer and Entrepreneur-in-Residence.

Found this article useful? **Subscribe** to our weekly newsletter.

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on **Twitter** and **Facebook**

#### **Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/entrepreneurship/seven-behaviours-boosting-change-readiness>

---

#### **About the author(s)**

**Liana Burtsava** Liana Burtsava is an alum of INSEAD's MBA programme (July 2006), an INSEAD Entrepreneur-in-Residence, and a guest lecturer.