
How To Align What You Say With What You Do



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Bridging the divide between best intentions and actual behaviour.

There is often a gap between our good intentions and our actual behaviour – what we claim to do and how we act. Alarmingly, we're sometimes not even aware of the difference between what we think we're doing and what we're really doing.

Aligning our actions with our intentions is challenging, as our **unconscious mind** can influence and even derail our behaviour and decision-making. While we may think our actions are guided by conscious, rational thought, only a small part of our brain is actively engaged in conscious reasoning.

Neuroscience provides some insight into how our brain functions. There is constant tension between the prefrontal cortex, responsible for logical reasoning, and the amygdala, associated with emotions and memory. In stressful situations, the emotional amygdala overrides rational decision-making.

Even when we understand such neurological processes, it is hard to acknowledge the existence of an unconscious, less reflective and more emotional part of our mind that influences our decision-making. We resist the idea that many of our decisions are not grounded in logic and reason, or that we may not be entirely in control of our actions.

Sigmund Freud explained this perplexing struggle between our emotional impulses and our rational thought processes using the metaphor of the rider and the horse. The rider represents our conscious mind and rational thoughts, while the horse symbolises our unconscious mind – the source of our emotions, instincts and desires.

Ideally, the rider should be in control, guiding the horse towards a desired destination. However, the horse's strong impulses often pull the rider off course, resulting in conflicts between best intentions and actions.

It may be helpful to extend Freud's metaphor and replace the image of a horse with that of an elephant. This elephant represents the processes that take place under the surface – the psychological dynamics that determine our character.

This mighty mammal is stubborn and resistant to change, always on guard and quick to defensively respond to any trigger. The elephant inside us will charge at anything that appears to be a threat.

Ironically, our inner elephant doesn't have a thick skin. We take criticism personally and become defensive when challenged. We often view ourselves more positively than others do and overestimate our contributions to our successes.

In the face of failure, we deflect criticism and are quick to blame others for shortcomings. This kind of positive reframing can be important to maintain our mental equilibrium. It can help us avoid depressive feelings and maintain the self-esteem, confidence and optimism needed to keep us motivated.

But neglecting to manage our inner elephant can bring out the worst in us. For example, in a managerial setting, an executive may receive feedback that they are micromanaging or steamrolling their team. Despite committing to change, this person consistently reverts to unconscious behaviour. They say all the right things about how they are delegating, allowing for failures

and trusting their team, yet nothing changes.

So, how can we outsmart the unconscious processes of the brain?

Managing the elephant

The first step is honestly evaluating our actions. We need to create the psychological space to acknowledge our behaviour, especially if our actions up until this point have proven ineffective. There also needs to be a real desire for change.

Subsequently, we need to engage the reflective, analytical part of our minds to develop ways to override some of the unconscious processes derailing our good intentions. Most of us have the ability to observe ourselves. By leveraging and reflecting on these observations, we can gain greater control over our actions. However, achieving this requires an effort to deconstruct unconscious processes and thoroughly examine what is happening.

Embrace discomfort

Embarking on this inner journey necessitates a genuine desire for self-improvement and a willingness to step outside our comfort zones. Feedback and constructive criticism, received without defensiveness, can serve as a catalyst. To create tipping points for change, we need to be prepared to confront topics that are somewhat uncomfortable.

Enhance awareness

Engaging in a 360-degree feedback developmental exercise can create a higher level of awareness of our shortcomings and the gap between our perceived and actual behaviour. This exercise may help us see ourselves from others' perspectives and identify the areas we really need to work on. It initiates the process of questioning our actions and reflecting on the barriers preventing us from doing what we say we want to do.

Seek assistance

Addressing intrapsychic blockages may require the assistance of an executive coach or psychotherapist. Such professionals can help explore the misalignment between our problematic behaviours and goals, affirm our

ability to change and help us become more aware of the consequences of our actions.

Develop coping strategies

Coaches and psychotherapists can acknowledge when we are making small steps in the right direction and provide support in developing coping strategies to prevent a return to our problematic behaviour. This includes processing relapses and developing plans to prevent such relapses from happening again.

Review progress and responsibility

A coach or confidante can assist in monitoring and evaluating our progress toward long-term goals, while always reminding us that we are responsible for implementing the necessary changes.

Ultimately, only we are responsible for managing the elephant inside. The unconscious, despite its powerful forces, can be overruled. We are not always operating on autopilot. The key is to get better at activating our reflective side.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/career/how-align-what-you-say-what-you-do>

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