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SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

TURNING INTENTIONS INTO ACTION: PRACTICAL EVIDENCE-BASED TIPS FOR FACILITATING INDIVIDUAL BEHAVIOR CHANGE

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Helping individuals develop new behaviors and lasting habits is critical to consulting psychologists in the coaching, training, and consulting programs they are involved in. Despite the numerous theories, models, and frameworks for habit and behavior change practitioners and leaders are still in search of a concise, evidence-based model to effectively assist clients and employees in setting and achieving goals that enhance individual, team, and organizational effectiveness and support change initiatives. This article revisits and updates the theory-based 3E (*enlighten, encourage, and enable*) model of individual behavior change to translate insight and intentions into deliberate practice leading to successful individual change outcomes (Mashihi & Nowack, 2025; Nowack, 2009).

What's It Mean? Implications for Consulting Psychology

Although intentions to change behavior show a moderate yet positive correlation with actual habit change, recent research offers valuable insights for practitioners. These findings can assist clients and employees in establishing and effectively implementing goals that foster new rituals, behaviors, and habits (Jekauc et al., 2025; Nowack, 2017). This article provides an expanded and updated description of the 3E (enlighten, encourage, and enable) individual change model for consulting psychologists based on current theories, frameworks, models, and ontologies of successful behavior and habit change in organizations (Mashihi & Nowack, 2025; Nowack, 2019).

Keywords: goal striving, goal setting, implementation intentions, behavior change, habits

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Successful Individual Behavior Change: Why Is It so Difficult?

Organizations are currently being influenced by a diverse array of trends, including geopolitical tensions, interconnected global economic shifts, technological advances, the adoption of hybrid and return-to-work models, an increased emphasis on employee well-being, and rapid advancements in generative artificial intelligence (Connell, 2025; Yee et al., 2024). Unexpected opportunities and challenges now are the "new normal" for all organizations, requiring both reactive and proactive strategies and approaches for successful change initiatives.

Multiple surveys and studies suggest that organizations are increasingly exploring and actively accelerating transformations and continuous change efforts in diverse areas to remain globally competitive and even to survive (Albrecht & Roughsedge, 2023; G. Dai et al., 2025). In today's fast-paced and rapidly changing environment, an organization's ability to stay competitive in the global marketplace depends on its employees' agility and adaptiveness to swiftly learn and apply new knowledge, skills, and behaviors. The success of organizational and team change efforts is largely dependent on a variety of individual factors, including employees readiness, positive affect, self-efficacy, and ability to develop new routines and habits (Judge et al., 1999; Nowack & Niemirowski, 2021; Oreg et al., 2018).

A major challenge for practitioners in coaching, training, enhancing team effectiveness, and consulting is facilitating successful individual behavior changes that foster sustainable long-term habits leading to enhanced overall performance (Nowack, 2017). Many recent best-selling books, while grounded in similar habit change models and frameworks, lack a comprehensive systems approach that consulting psychologists and leaders need to effectively implement successful individual change programs for employees. Such an approach is critical for initiating and sustaining meaningful individual change, especially given the unique personality traits, motivational levels, cognitive diversity, and work/life challenges of clients within complex and diverse organizational cultures (e.g., Clear, 2018; Duhigg, 2013; Fogg, 2020; Goldsmith & Reiter, 2015).

Even when practitioners and leaders offer and implement learning and development programs to address specific organizational issues and problems, the resulting changes in individual behavior may still be minimal. For example, an earlier meta-analysis of 26 longitudinal studies by Smither et al. (2005) suggests that feedback programs and coaching does lead to significant improvements to behavior change and perceptions of improved performance, but the effect sizes (average .25) are considered only small to modest. In addition, neuroscience research suggests that it takes about six to eight repetitions to foster neuroplasticity and approximately 60–90 days of sustained practice for new behaviors to become automatic (Buyalskaya et al., 2023; Grill-Spector et al., 2006; Lally et al., 2010; Nowack, 2024).

For most clients and employees, making substantial and sustained changes to habits and behaviors can be quite challenging, even for those who are highly intrinsically motivated and rewarded. Some research on personality development goals also suggests that goal motivation to increase a specific trait generally rises initially until trait levels drop, but goals to decrease negative aspects of the trait may not demonstrate comparable growth as trait levels decrease (Dupré et al., 2025).

A variety of individual factors, such as personality, neurodiversity, and readiness to change, alongside organizational elements like reinforcement, managerial support, and sufficient time for deliberate practice, are essential in determining whether clients and employees can effectively translate newly acquired behaviors into meaningful habit changes relevant to their roles. Although individual behavior change can be challenging, practitioners and leaders have access to a wealth of models, frameworks, and theories to guide their efforts with clients and employees.

This article is intended to summarize current evidence-based individual change typologies and update a more parsimonious and pragmatic habit and behavior change model that practitioners and leaders can apply in diverse coaching, training, work redesign, team building, performance management, employee involvement, and learning and development programs (3E individual behavior change model; Mashihi & Nowack, 2025). Although the focus of this article will be on 1:1 relationships for practitioners, the tips and strategies presented have embedded lessons from the organizational change capability literature (G. Dai et al., 2025). Each tip and strategy will be just as

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useful for leaders and organizations encouraging and requiring successful individual change efforts of their employees.

Major Theories of Individual Behavior and Habit Change

For practitioners and leaders there is an extensive literature attempting to explain individual, rather than organizational, change, and each offers a unique perspective on why employees behave the way they do and how to facilitate successful change efforts. Analyzing evidence-based best practices in both the theory and application of current habit and behavior change is likely to create confusion due to the abundance of similar and overlapping theories, models, frameworks, and ontologies. Some examples of each include,

- Behavior change theories: Explain actions and make predictions about future-oriented behavior of individuals that can be tested through research (e.g., intentional change theory; R. E. Boyatzis, 2019, 2025).
- Behavior change models: Provide a set of steps and practical tools to guide clients toward goal setting, goal striving, and successful goal accomplishment (e.g., United Nations Children's Fund behavioral drivers model; Petit, 2019; the Hook model of behavioral design; Eyal & Hoover, 2014).
- Behavior change frameworks: Provide specific practices guiding practitioners and leaders in their individual behavior and habit change programs (e.g., behavior change techniques taxonomy; Michie et al., 2011).
- Behavior change ontologies: Provide a formal naming, representation, and definition of the properties, categories, and relationships between behavior change data, concepts, and factors (e.g., Behavior Change Intervention Ontology).

A number of attempts have been made to review, categorize, and summarize the behavior and habit change literature over the last several years (Schenk et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2025; West et al., 2019). For example, Cane et al. (2012) reviewed 33 theories and 128 key theoretical constructs related to behavior change and distilled them into 14 domains known as Theoretical Domains Framework. These authors identified both conceptual and statistical support for their comprehensive framework, which encompasses knowledge and skills, social and professional roles, beliefs about capabilities and consequences, reinforcement, intentions, goals, memory, attention, decision-making processes, environmental contexts, social influences, and emotional regulation. Davis et al. (2015) provided an update and revision to the original Theoretical Domains Framework (Cane et al., 2012) by identifying and categorizing 82 theories of behavior and behavior change.

United Nations Children's Fund published their behavior drivers model (Petit, 2019) based on an analysis of 25 theories and models of habit and behavior change. The behavior drivers model focuses on three categories of behavior and habit change, including psychological (e.g., interest, personal characteristics, self-efficacy, cognitive biases), sociological (e.g., social influence, community), and environmental factors (e.g., government, structural barriers).

Other examples include the Human Behavior Ontology (Schenk et al., 2025) providing a comprehensive ontology and associated set of practical online tools and resources to: (a) report habit change research, (b) link data sets between researchers and their studies, and (c) synthesize evidence across diverse study findings. This project is part of the broader Behavior Change Intervention Ontology and utilizes artificial intelligence and machine learning algorithms to predict intervention outcomes across various behavior change situations (https://www.humanbehaviourchange.org/).

Table 1 provides an overview of 15 of the most cited and influential evidence-based theories, models, frameworks, and ontologies for individual behavior change. Practitioners and leaders are likely to encounter and apply many of these concepts, either in part or in full, when working with their clients and employees.

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Table 1

Summary of Influential Theories, Model, and Frameworks of Individual Behavior and Habit Change

Habit/behavior change theory/model/framework	Description
Human behavior change ontology/BCIO	The HBO, a part of the BCIO, introduces a formal framework for categorizing and describing human behaviors. This framework, called the HBO, aims to create a standardized way to represent and understand various human actions: providing tools and resources to be used in reporting research, linking data sets, and synthesizing evidence and artificial intelligence/machine learning algorithms to predict intervention outcomes in novel scenarios. https://www.humanbehaviourchange.org/
BCTT	The BCTT is a cross-domain, hierarchically ordered taxonomy of 93 distinct behavior change technique's with labels, definitions, and examples for specifying, interpreting, and implementing the active ingredients of interventions to change behaviors (Davis et al., 2015; Michie et al., 2015).
COM-B model	The COM-B model emphasizes capability, opportunity, and motivation as the core drivers of behavior (West & Michie, 2020).
The BCW	The BCW is adapted from the COM-B and uses the initial three components of capability, opportunity, and motivation to provide seven policy categories and nine intervention functions used to develop effective behavior change interventions (Hamzah et al., 2025; Michie et al., 2011).
The BDM: A conceptual framework for social and behavior change programming	The BDM unpacks 25 perspectives, theories, and models to summarize key drivers of behavior change including psychological, sociological, and environmental factors (Petit, 2019).
ICT	ICT posits that change is an iterative process involving five stages: (a) discovering the ideal self; (b) exploring the real self; (c) developing a learning agenda; (d) experimenting with new behaviors, thoughts, and feelings; and (e) practicing these new behaviors (R. E. Boyatzis, 2019, 2024, 2025; R. E. Boyatzis & Jack, 2018; R. Boyatzis & McKee, 2006; Jack et al., 2013).
The hook model of behavioral design	The hook model of behavioral design is a framework that describes a cyclical, four-stage process for designing addictive products: trigger, action, variable reward, and investment (Eyal & Hoover, 2014).
3Bs of behavioral design	Successful individual behavior change is seen as a framework that summarizes: (a) behavior, (b) barriers, and (c) benefits to facilitate successful new habits (Irrational Labs, 2017).
Implementation intentions	Implementation intention is a self-regulatory strategy using *if-then-plans* that can lead to goal attainment and habit formation (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).
Mental contrasting	Mental contrasting is a self-regulation strategy that can help with habit change by helping people visualize the gap between their current reality and their desired future (Oettingen & Gollwitzer, 2018).
The TTM of change	The TTM of change, also known as *the stages of change model*, is a theory that explains how people change their behaviors through a series of stages (Norcross et al., 2011).
Goal-setting theory	Goal-setting theory states that creating and implementing goals with clarity, challenge, commitment, feedback, and complexity is associated with successful task performance (Locke & Latham, 2002).
The HBM	The HBM that posits that six constructs predict health behavior: risk susceptibility, risk severity, benefits to action, barriers to action, self-efficacy, and cues to action (Becker, 1974).
The TPB	The TBP suggests that behavior is determined by intentions, attitudes (beliefs about a behavior), and subjective norms (beliefs about others' attitudes toward a behavior, Ajzen, 1991).
SCT	SCT posits that individuals learn not only from direct experiences but also by observing others (Bandura, 1977).

Note. HBO = Human Behavior Ontology; BCIO = Behavior Change Intervention Ontology; BCTT = Behavior Change Techniques Taxonomy; COM-B = Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation, Behavior; BCW = Behavior Change Wheel; ICT = intentional change theory; TTM = transtheoretical model; HBM = health belief model; TPB = theory of planned behavior; SCT = social cognitive theory.

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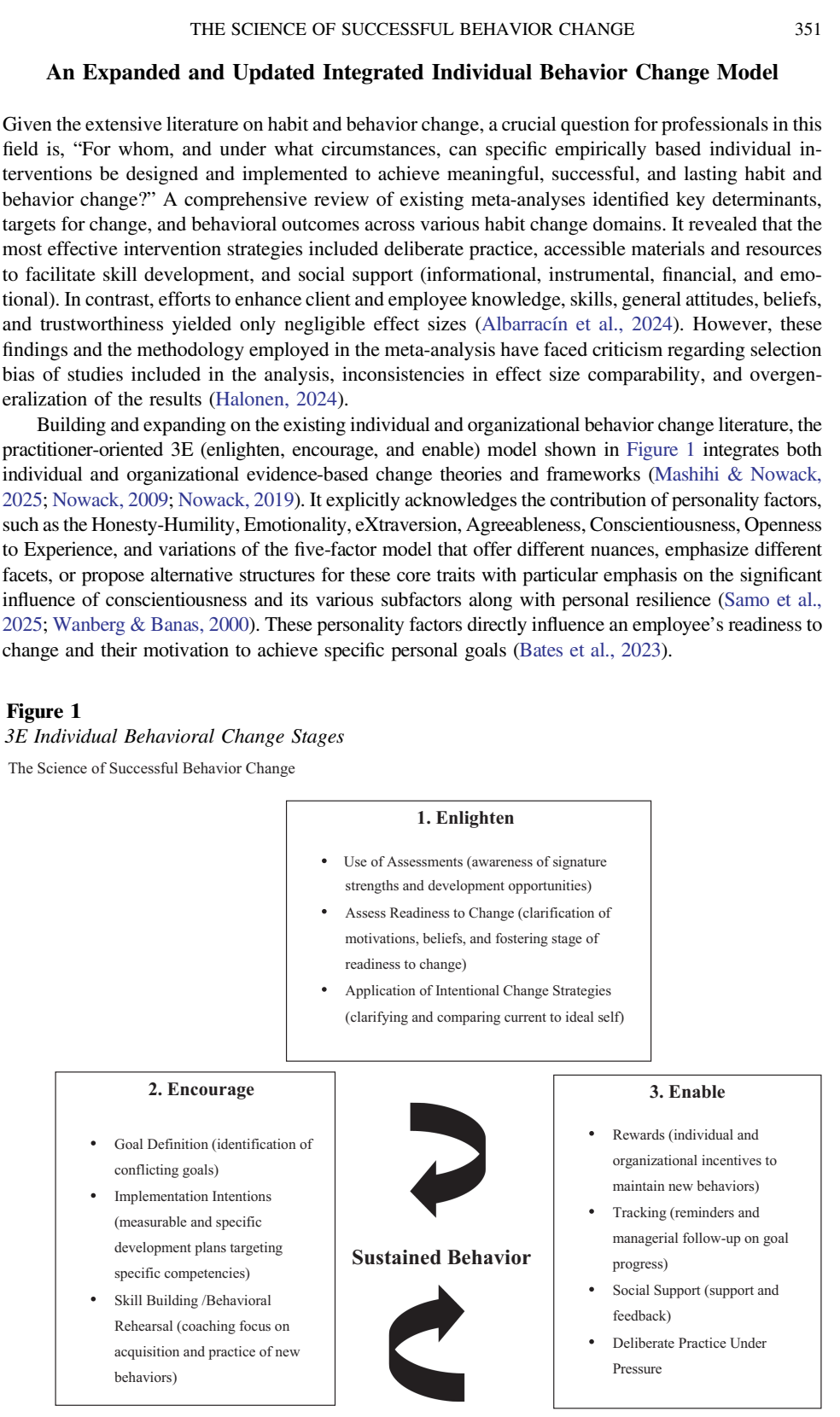
An Expanded and Updated Integrated Individual Behavior Change Model

Given the extensive literature on habit and behavior change, a crucial question for professionals in this field is, "For whom, and under what circumstances, can specific empirically based individual interventions be designed and implemented to achieve meaningful, successful, and lasting habit and behavior change?" A comprehensive review of existing meta-analyses identified key determinants, targets for change, and behavioral outcomes across various habit change domains. It revealed that the most effective intervention strategies included deliberate practice, accessible materials and resources to facilitate skill development, and social support (informational, instrumental, financial, and emotional). In contrast, efforts to enhance client and employee knowledge, skills, general attitudes, beliefs, and trustworthiness yielded only negligible effect sizes (Albarracín et al., 2024). However, these findings and the methodology employed in the meta-analysis have faced criticism regarding selection bias of studies included in the analysis, inconsistencies in effect size comparability, and overgeneralization of the results (Halonen, 2024).

Building and expanding on the existing individual and organizational behavior change literature, the practitioner-oriented 3E (enlighten, encourage, and enable) model shown in Figure 1 integrates both individual and organizational evidence-based change theories and frameworks (Mashihi & Nowack, 2025; Nowack, 2009; Nowack, 2019). It explicitly acknowledges the contribution of personality factors, such as the Honesty-Humility, Emotionality, eXtraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Openness to Experience, and variations of the five-factor model that offer different nuances, emphasize different facets, or propose alternative structures for these core traits with particular emphasis on the significant influence of conscientiousness and its various subfactors along with personal resilience (Samo et al., 2025; Wanberg & Banas, 2000). These personality factors directly influence an employee's readiness to change and their motivation to achieve specific personal goals (Bates et al., 2023).

Figure 1

3E Individual Behavioral Change Stages



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In addition, the 3E model draws upon research related to acceptance and successful adoption of change efforts in the context of organizational initiatives and programs (e.g., Judge et al., 1999; Oreg et al., 2011), and it highlights the individual perspective within the organizational change capability model described by G. Dai et al. (2025). For example, in data collected from six organizations, individual trait factors of risk tolerance and self-concept significantly predicted self-reports and independent assessments of coping with the change in two field studies (G. Dai et al., 2025). The author's two studies indicate that an individual's inclination toward novelty interacts with both self-efficacy (individual) and perceived benefits (organizational) to directly influence emotional and behavioral responses to specific change initiatives. They contend that by identifying the factors that shape employee reactions to these initiatives, organizations can employ targeted strategies to cultivate supportive cultures that foster engagement, motivation, and productivity.

The 3E model of individual behavior change uniquely highlights the crucial role of self-insight and self-awareness in fostering clarity and the importance of intrinsic motivation for effective goal initiation. Our practitioner-oriented model also emphasizes important structural and environmental factors required to maintain new behaviors over time (e.g., manager, peer, and family support; ongoing nudging; monitoring; and reward mechanisms). The 3E model is thought to be sequential in that each stage is prerequisite for the next to foster successful behavior change.

Each stage of the updated 3E individual change model will be discussed with specific evidence-based and practical suggestions, tips, and strategies to guide practitioners, leaders, and organizations to support successful individual behavior change initiatives and programs. When possible, each of the practitioner tips and suggestions are ordered according to existing research publications and effect sizes where they are available. When possible, pointing out limitations or conflicting studies related to specific tips will also be highlighted.

Although no single tip or suggestion has been shown to be necessarily more advantageous to help clients and employees successfully achieve successful behavior change outcomes, each may be applied uniquely considering a wide range of individual factors (e.g., cognitive variability) present in employees. It is important to emphasize that changing habits and behaviors can be challenging for anyone, but it can present unique obstacles for neurodiverse individuals, who may experience things like sensory processing differences, cognitive executive functioning challenges, or both.

Numerous researchers and authors advocate for practitioners and leaders to explore various strategies that account for neurodiversity, personality differences, and other individual cognitive differences when adapting the tips and suggestions within the 3E individual change model (Dahlstrom, 2024; Praslova, 2024; Rollnik-Sadowska & Grabińska, 2024). Some of these include (a) identifying and understanding the individual variability of the employee along with reasonable accommodations when appropriate; (b) recognizing the need for predictable and established routines to provide a sense of security during change processes; (c) using clear, direct, concise, and preferred communication about and during change processes; (d) recognizing sensory and environmental barriers and contributors to individual change; and (e) providing support, encouragement, and praise individual efforts and accomplishments while being patient with setbacks and the time it takes for such individuals to successfully modify habits and learn new behaviors. Finally, it should be emphasized that traditional theories, frameworks, and approaches to successful individual habit and behavior change efforts may also need to be customized and adapted to those who are ageing or experiencing systematic stress in their work and life.

Stage 1: Enlighten

The enlighten stage is focused on helping clients and employees develop accurate self-insight/self-awareness regarding their signature strengths and potential development areas. In our own research we found that slightly over 50% of leaders either overestimated or underestimated their own self-ratings on interpersonal and social competence compared to an ability-based measure of emotional intelligence skills (Mashihi & Nowack, 2025). Accurate insight and self-awareness are necessary first steps but not sufficient alone for successful behavioral change efforts to take place (Kim et al., 2019; Zell & Krizan, 2014). At least three distinct streams of research offer insights into why clients and employees may struggle to accurately evaluate their skills, abilities, personality traits, and performance, including:

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1. Positive illusions (Taylor & Brown, 1994): Taylor and her colleagues have posited three fundamental cognitive illusions that help maintain our self-esteem and avoid discomfort: (a) inflated assessment of one's own skills and abilities, (b) unrealistic optimism about our future, and (c) an exaggerated perception of the control we have over life events.

2. Better-than-average effect (Alicke & Govorun, 2005): The better-than-average effect is a common social comparison tendency for people to evaluate themself as better than others in terms of their abilities, personality traits, and other attributes.

3. Dunning–Kruger effect (Kruger & Dunning, 1999): This effect refers to the tendency of employees with weaker skills to give overly positive assessments of their abilities, even when contrary evidence exists. Although some suggest that the Dunning–Kruger effect is simply an extension of the better-than-average effect, our experience in coaching and teaching executives leads us to believe that the overestimation of skills and misinterpretation of their impact on others is more prevalent among those who are genuinely less competent (Gignac & Zajenkowski, 2020; Heck et al., 2025).

In addition, recent research suggests that various cognitive biases significantly influence the accuracy of self-assessments concerning skills, abilities, personality, and performance (Oeberst & Imhoff, 2023). For practitioners and leaders, recognizing these following biases is crucial, as this awareness can improve goal-setting processes and facilitate meaningful behavior change in clients and employees:

- Illusion of information (Gehlbach et al., 2024): Tendency to overestimate their understanding of a situation, leading them to believe their interpretation represents the objective truth.

- Illusion of transparency (Gilovich & Savitsky, 1999): Tendency to overestimate how their inner states, emotions, and feelings are noticed by others.

- Self-serving bias (Mullen & Riordan, 1988): Tendency to view their shortcomings and failures are due to external factors but their strengths and successes to internal factors.

- False consensus (Nickerson, 1999): Tendency to misunderstand how clearly others perceive their behavioral intentions and goals.

- Spotlight effect (Gilovich et al., 2000): Tendency to miscalculate how much and exactly what is actually noticed, observed, and evaluated by others.

- Social projection (Robbins & Krueger, 2005): Tendency to assume that others share their own characteristics, attitudes, values, and preferences.

The enlighten stage of the 3E model seeks to assess readiness for adopting new behaviors by evaluating the alignment between clients' and employees' behaviors with the experiences of others. This involves identifying "opportunities for development" alongside recognizing acknowledged discrepancies known as "blind spots." Two similar frameworks to explore self and other perceptions have emerged in the consulting psychology literature, both based on the Johari window (Luft & Ingham, 1955). These are termed the *leadership arena-reputation-identity model* (Loignon et al., 2025) and *trait-reputation-identity model* (McAbee & Connelly, 2016; Vergauwe et al., 2022).

Without clarity about what to focus on, clients and employees are unlikely to commit specific actions or initiate personal goals that are intrinsically motivating or desired by others. The enlighten stage within the 3E model facilitates focused conversations with clients and employees regarding goal readiness and specificity, as well as the ways in which targeted behavior and habit changes can enhance their future development, performance, and overall well-being.

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Practitioner Tips for the Enlighten Stage

Focus on Having Your Client Visualize Their Ideal or Future Self to Define Specific Behavior Change Goals

Intentional change theory (R. E. Boyatzis, 2024, 2025; R. E. Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006) posits that employees are more likely to pursue behavioral change when they are internally motivated by a comparison between their current self and their ideal self. This research suggests that when clients focus on what really matters to them they can translate this into a vision of what they want to become in the future. As a result, they are better equipped to cope with the stress of change and be more successful in their own personal and professional development. Drawing from their functional magnetic resonance imaging coaching studies, R. E. Boyatzis and Jack (2018) recommended that practitioners and leaders carefully monitor and minimize overusing solution-focused and directive feedback styles during early stages of meetings and coaching conversations, as excessive application can activate the task-positive or executive network linked to increased stress, anxiety, and defensiveness, thereby interfering with goal initiation.

Practitioner Tip

When possible, practitioners can use data from interviews, personality inventories, and other assessments to explore and discuss any gaps in how their client currently views themselves (identity) versus how they are perceived and experienced by others (reputation). Examining and discussing the disparity between a client's present self-identity and their envisioned ideal self stimulates the default mode network in the brain, which is linked to both motivation and goal setting (R. E. Boyatzis, 2024, 2025; R. E. Boyatzis & Jack, 2018). This approach empowers clients to define their desired and future identity by assisting them to: (a) clarify their self-perception (identity); (b) identify the key actions and behaviors they wish to commit throughout their development journey (process); and (c) articulate what they want to achieve at a behavioral level (outcome).

Use 360-Degree-Feedback Assessments to Facilitate Self-Awareness

Accuracy of knowing one's own skills and abilities relative to others is a useful way to conceptualize and define accurate self-awareness (Nowack, 2009; Nowack & Mashihi, 2025). Research supports a significant association of self-insight (a core component of emotional and social competence) with both individual and team performance (Bratton et al., 2022; Dierdorff & Rubin, 2015; Krén & Séllei, 2021; Mayer & Caruso, 2025; Nielsen et al., 2022). As such, understanding and accepting feedback about other's perceptions are important for enhancing self-awareness to facilitate habit and behavior change (Mashihi & Nowack, 2013; Tafvelin et al., 2021).

An important question to consider is what type of feedback is most effective for different employees, and under what conditions does it enhance their motivation to set goals that drive improved performance? Recent research presents contradictory findings on the impact of past- and future-oriented feedback on strengthening self-awareness in emotional intelligence and improving employees' learning agility (Williams & Nowack, 2022).

For example, in six experiments, feedback focused on the past was recalled consistently better than feedback focused on the future, and the information was recalled as evaluative (Nash et al., 2018). One explanation for these findings is that recall of past socially painful situations elicits greater pain than reliving even a past physically painful event (Chen et al., 2008). However, other research suggests that employees are significantly more motivated to improve when they perceive feedback to be focused on future actions as opposed to past performance (Gnepp et al., 2020).

Practitioner Tip

The use of 360-degree-feedback assessments with clients facilitates analysis of gaps between self and other perceptions of current skill, behavior, and performance (Mashihi & Nowack, 2013; Nielsen et al., 2022).

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Practitioners should utilize 360-degree-feedback with a developmental and forward-looking perspective, as this approach fosters greater acceptance and motivates clients to commit to specific developmental actions (Gnepp et al., 2020). In general, practitioners and leaders should generally focus on providing positive feedback at the beginning of the employee's goal pursuit. As the coaching assignment progresses to the middle and end stages, they should shift to future-oriented feedback and incorporate detailed tips, suggestions, and instructions to enhance the perceived value of rewards (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2011).

Encourage the Deliberate Practice of Mindfulness to Facilitate Self-Awareness

Being mindful, staying in the moment rather than ruminating about the past or worrying about the future, causes specific brain networks associated with learning and memory to be activated (McDonald & Mott, 2017; Petersen & Posner, 2012). Focusing attention on our thoughts and feelings through mindfulness training can enhance our awareness of the boundaries of our comfort zones and increase self-insight (Lindsay et al., 2025). Research suggests that mindfulness training, and acceptance training in particular, can broaden awareness to include more positive affective experiences, improve general attention/insight, and facilitate executive brain functioning (Sumantry & Stewart, 2021; Tabibnia, 2020).

Mindfulness training techniques are specific in both methodologies and desired outcomes. Practitioners suggesting or teaching mindfulness to their clients should be aware that different approaches activate overlapping but distinct neural networks and achieve different well-being outcomes. It is also important to point out that some clients and employees may experience possible meditation-related unusual experiences and even adverse effects (Van Dam et al., 2025). However, research generally indicates that attention- or presence-based mindfulness training in particular is most potent for addressing negative effects by uncertainty, stress as a result of work demands, social comparison, social overload, or lack of recognition relative to socioemotional or perspective-based training (e.g., Liebmann et al., 2023).

Practitioner Tip

Practitioners can encourage their clients to engage in homework assignments to practice attention or presence-based mindfulness meditation to enhance self-awareness and emotion regulation (Pashler et al., 2001; Tabibnia & Radecki, 2018). For example, Hölzel et al. (2011) observed significant structural changes in gray-matter concentration within the hippocampus (brain regions involved in learning and memory processes) within a period of 8 weeks of practice compared to control participants. Beyond enhancing client self-awareness, attention-based practice of mindfulness has also been linked to alleviation of stress, anxiety, and pain-related problems (Liebmann et al., 2023).

Stage 2: Encourage

Simply defining goals does not guarantee that a client or employee will act on them or remain committed over time (Nowack, 2017). Early research exploring the intention–behavior relationship consistently revealed a positive correlation of 0.48, 0.51, and 0.53 between motivation and action (Hagger et al., 2002; McEachan et al., 2016). Meta-analyses support the view that behavioral intentions are the strongest, but not necessarily the best, predictor of action, explaining between 18% and 23% of variance in action across a broad range of behaviors (Conner & Norman, 2025). This "intention–behavior gap" is noteworthy, with a majority of positive intenders (i.e., those with the strongest or most extreme intentions) failing to act (26%–46%). Despite evidence of a positive correlation between intentions and subsequent actions, a considerable part of behavior variance still is unexplained, emphasizing the complex nature of habit and behavior change. Past behavior, social norms, perceived behavioral capacity (e.g., self-efficacy, control, autonomy), and affective attitudes appear to be significant predictors of action in those with strong intentions (Conner & Norman, 2022, 2025).

The encourage stage of the 3E model involves gaining individual commitment, motivation, and enhancing readiness to change toward an explicit habit and behavior change plan. During this stage,

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the practitioner examines signs of resistance in clients and actively enhances the clarity of the action plan's goals while also reinforcing the commitment to implement them. When working on individual change, understanding and addressing the root factors that cause friction is essential for successfully adopting new practices. For example, the theoretical domains framework (Atkins et al., 2017) offers a structured approach to identifying key motivational drivers of behavior as well as specific psychological and context factors that influence successful behavior change.

The client's motivation to change depends on the gap and intensity between their action plan goals and their current desires and circumstances. The practitioner should assist the client in assessing whether their goal is realistic, specific, and measurable. Broad, general, and unrealistic goals can undermine confidence and hinder the ability to maintain change over time, potentially leading to relapse (Dimeff & Marlatt, 1998; Larimer et al., 1999).

Practitioner Tips for the Encourage Stage

Focus on Making Goals Intrinsically Motivating for Clients

Goals that lack intrinsic motivation are less likely to result in long-term behavior and habit change (Fishbach & Woolley, 2022; Morris et al., 2022; Woolley & Fishbach, 2018). For instance, several studies tracking New Year's resolutions of thousands of people have found that intrinsic motivation (experiencing goal pursuit as an end in itself) significantly predicts long-term adherence to goals better than extrinsic motivation (Bandhu et al., 2024; Woolley et al., 2025). In addition, breaking down goals into tiny steps (Fogg, 2020) and making them normal, easy, attractive, and routine enhances internal drive and interest to pursue them (Michie et al., 2011; Woolley & Fishbach, 2018).

The hardest part of behavior change for most clients and employees is getting started. Breaking goal behavior down into small and realistic commitments and steps can help to overcome procrastination and enable clients to do something, rather than do nothing. In addition, ensuring that clients do not have competing commitments, referred to as *immunity to change* (e.g., time, money, cognitive or physical effort, support, and biological rhythms), can also enhance motivation to pursue goals over time (Kegan & Lahey, 2009).

Practitioner Tip

Taking a page from motivational interviewing, practitioners can utilize a specific exercise called the *Readiness Ruler* with clients to facilitate motivation and change by exploring and resolving ambivalence (W. Miller & Rollnick, 2002; W. R. Miller & Rose, 2009). The Readiness Ruler has two steps, each with one question, and utilizes a 0–10 response (*not all motivated* to *extremely ready or high motivated*) scale to help clients evaluate the importance of the personal changes they desire and to evaluate their confidence about making those changes. After a client shares a number from the scale, practitioners use the following questions to elicit change-talk: (a) Why did you rate yourself a (insert no. of client reports) and not a zero? (b) What would it take for you to get from (insert no. of client reports) to (the next higher number)? The discussion facilitates positive change talk and increases intrinsic motivation to act on stated goal intentions by the client.

Replace SMART Goals With the Use of Implementation Intentions

One useful mnemonic for goal setting is SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals. However, despite the widespread popularity and use of this goal-setting approach, it might not be that *smart* to always use them given numerous shortcomings (Nowack, 2015; Swann et al., 2023). In fact, open (nonspecific) and "do your best" or "open" goals that are task focused and phrased in an exploratory manner have also been shown to be as effectual in some circumstances, such as learning new skills, relative to the popular SMART goal approach (Pietsch et al., 2024; Swann et al., 2025). A meta-analysis of 27 studies on the effects of goal setting in sport found that, relative to control conditions, nonspecific goals ($d = 0.72$) had a larger but nonsignificant effect size than specific goals

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($d = 0.37$) in predicting task performance (Swann et al., 2025). The use of do your best or open goals tend to go against popular and prominent goal-setting theories advocating that all goals should be specific in order to be successful (e.g., Locke & Latham, 2006).

With goals of any type, the use of implementation intentions ("if" and "then" plans) is significantly more robust to ensure behavioral rehearsal necessary to translate goal intentions into established habits (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). A meta-analysis involving more than 8,000 participants in 94 independent studies revealed a medium-to-large average effect size ($d = 0.65$) of implementation intentions on goal achievement in various domains (e.g., interpersonal, environmental, health) beyond the effects of mere goal intentions (Conner & Higgins, 2010; Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006).

The "if" part of the implementation intention is a specific situation, trigger, or cue. The "then" part of the goal is a statement of the behavior desired to be modified that is observable and measurable (e.g., stop, start, do more, do less). Some habit triggers will be situation-based (e.g., "When I feel defensive, I will utilize cyclic breathing to slow my mind down"), and others will be time-based (e.g., "During my weekly employee check-in meetings, I will seek to understand and listen with empathy before sharing my point of view").

Additional triggers might involve location (where a person or temptation is located), emphasizing emotions (e.g., identifying and labeling feelings to pair with a new habit), or social network (e.g., analyzing and changing your client's social network or purposeful interactions). Fogg (2020) asserted that the most effective trigger for behavior change is the integration of a new behavior into an existing habit. For example, a client can successfully adopt a new behavior by linking it to a well-established routine at work. This form of "habit stacking" can successfully help pairing existing routines and habits to trigger the practice of new or replacement behaviors. For example, immediately after their weekly one-on-one meeting with an employee (current behavior), a leader might jot down one or two specific points of praise or constructive, future-focused feedback from the conversation to share later. This new habit can enhance recognition and provide targeted feedforward.

Practitioner Tip

Motivated clients with a readiness to change will have the greatest success translating stated goals into ongoing practice plans (Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). Using an "if-then" implementation, intention method for goal implementation with clients will help maximize goal striving, completion, and success. Implementation intentions are powerful for practitioners to use with clients because they systematically facilitate deliberate practice to ensure both behavioral automaticity and long-term goal success (Conner & Higgins, 2010; Mashihi & Nowack, 2025).

Create Shorter "Middles" With Client Goals

Clients often experience high motivation at the beginning and at the very end of their goal pursuits. However, they also typically face a motivational "slump" in the middle, leading to decreased commitment and follow-through (Touré-Tillery & Fishbach, 2011, 2012). Research indicates that clients experience greater motivation and progress toward their goals when they concentrate on their accomplishments during the initial stages of their coaching journey. This focus on completed tasks should then transition to addressing what remains to be done (i.e., outstanding tasks) in the final phase of the goal pursuit (Bonezzi et al., 2011; Fishbach, 2018). In later stages of goal pursuit, a shift to focus and attention on the desired end-state as a reference point makes clients assess goal progress in terms of what is left to do. This facilitates increasing goal adherence and a strong "end-spurt" toward goal accomplishment (Bullard & Manchanda, 2017; Emanuel, 2019; Koo & Fishbach, 2008).

Practitioner Tip

Practitioners can address this typical motivational slump in the middle of their coaching program by having clients refocusing on their goals and linking them to specific anchors such as the start of the

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week, month, beginning/ending of a vacation, or a meaningful event, such as a birthday. This is sometimes referred to as the *fresh start effect* to help clients reignite their enthusiasm and motivation to continue pursuing their original goals (H. Dai et al., 2014).

Furthermore, breaking down the journey toward a client's goal into shorter, more manageable actions and steps can greatly enhance their chances of achievement and success (Fishbach, 2018). For instance, encouraging clients to establish specific subgoals with clearly defined activities and success indicators can help mitigate the risk of lapsing or even abandoning their goals altogether (Wrosch et al., 2003, 2007, 2013).

Explore Alternate Reward and Incentive Strategies to Enhance Client Motivation

The use of rewards and incentives is a frequently used tool to ensure successful habit and behavior change in almost all theoretical models and frameworks (Fogg, 2020). However, some rewards and incentives are much more effective than others depending on specific client goals. Research by Patel et al. (2018) showed that clients adhering to a structured exercise program were more likely to achieve their goals when faced with potential monetary losses rather than monetary gains. In this context, loss aversion played a key role in enhancing adherence to daily physical activity goals compared to those receiving positive incentives. Conversely, a series of experiments by Mehr et al. (2025) provided evidence that financial incentive rewards, which increase with consecutive task completions (known as *streak awards*), significantly boost persistence, commitment, and motivation.

It has been well established that variable reinforcement is a potent external motivator of human behavior—clients are motivated to continue engaging in a behavior due to the unpredictable nature of when they will receive a reward even when reinforcement is infrequent or even uncertain (Sharif & Woolley, 2022; Shen et al., 2019). Numerous studies using actual financial and other types of rewards provide evidence for this "motivating-uncertainty effect" (e.g., Shen et al., 2015).

Practitioner Tip

It is important to brainstorm with your client in the goal-setting process how they can build in and celebrate small wins ("habit fertilizer") during and at the conclusion of their goal pursuit. Fogg (2020) suggested that habits are formed more quickly if (a) clients find meaningful ways to reward and celebrate when they recall matching the new behavior with an existing behavior, (b) during the actual implementation of the habit, and (c) after the behavior has been completed, such as thinking a word or phrase like "yes" to yourself or even shouting it out loud.

With respect to external rewards, it is essential to collaborate with clients to ensure that these rewards are proximal rather than too distal to the behaviors being practiced. Encourage clients to creatively set goals that introduce an element of uncertainty or possibly emphasize losses over gains. For instance, a client might agree to eliminate a night of binge-watching their favorite shows or commit to donating to a cause they do not fully support if they fail to meet their goals. In addition, assist clients in developing "contingency contracts," which include self-imposed rewards and consequences, to enhance accountability. These contracts can incorporate "reward-based" incentives linking successful task completion to a personal reward or "consequence" incentives, which entail facing a loss if goals are not achieved.

Alternatively, consider implementing gamification techniques to turn client goals into a personal competition that enhances motivation and fosters success. Your client can explore several engaging strategies, such as (a) identifying potential moments of struggle and challenging them to sustain their effort just a bit longer; (b) encouraging them to set measurable targets for how much of a specific behavior they can achieve within a designated timeframe, such as exercising; and (c) recommending the use of a calendar or popular habit-tracking apps to document their achievements, which will help them visualize their progress. These approaches can effectively sustain ongoing motivation and enable clients to translate their goal aspirations into consistent, intentional practice over time.

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Optimize Your Client's Chronotype for Peak Performance and Productivity (da Vinci Moments)

It is well established that some people are more alert, productive, creative, and energetic in the morning ("morning larks") and others in the evening hours ("night owls"). These natural preferences for sleep, wakefulness, alertness, concentration, and focus are referred to as our *chronotypes*, and they are heavily influence by both genetics (PER3 gene) and one's 24-hr circadian rhythms (Kühnel et al., 2022; Rosa et al., 2021). Research has also established a significant association of individual chronotypes with diverse work-related performance outcomes and individual well-being.

For example, Guarana et al. (2021) examined the influence of chronotype on leadership practices. They found that during their optimal time of day (morning types in the morning and evening types in the evening), leaders were seen by followers as more charismatic and influential. In another study, Guarana et al. (2022) found that financial investors with morning chronotypes made more profitable investment decisions earlier in the morning whereas investors with evening chronotypes made better investment decisions late at night. For clients interested in determining their own chronotype, two of the most widely recommended and validated self-assessments used clinically and in sleep research include the Morningness-Eveningness Questionnaire or the Munich Chronotype Questionnaire.

Practitioner Tip

Help clients to identify their peak alertness and energy times during the day (morningness-eveningness preferences) to facilitate progress on specific goals they are working on with maximum alertness, focus, concentration, and productivity. Goal progress and success can be enhanced by practicing and applying new knowledge, skills, and behaviors that are aligned with a client's chronotype. Practitioners should be encouraging clients to "do something," rather than "do nothing," that matches their chronotype to help capitalize on their creativity and productivity "sweet spots" (their DaVinci moments) as well as getting started and maintaining momentum toward accomplishing their goals.

Stage 3: Enable

In the enable stage of the 3E model, practitioners actively assist clients in reinforcing new knowledge, boosting self-efficacy, and building a supportive network. They also prepare clients for inevitable behavioral lapses and potential relapses (DiClemente & Crisafulli, 2022) while promoting the deliberate practice of skills essential for initiating and sustaining important new behaviors resulting in successful habit formation. This is a stage involving "nudges" or reminders to prompt new behaviors, support by work colleagues (manager or peers), and a way for clients to monitor and measure their progress on specific goals they are working on.

In general, clients are more likely to try new behaviors in which they are confident in a successful outcome and feel a sense of mastery in maintaining it over time despite some possible setbacks and challenges. If the client is lacking confidence in his/her ability to implement the plan, the chances that he or she will maintain it over time will be low. Practitioners in the 3E enable stage should, whenever possible, assist clients in managing lapses and acknowledging their successes. They should leverage social support systems such as educating the client's manager on how to reinforce key behaviors and encourage peer coaching. In addition, practitioners should emphasize progress through structured reminders, the recognition and rewarding of accomplishments, and the evaluation of goal progress (Mehner et al., 2025).

Practitioners and leaders should also be cognizant of the need to tailor feedback and support depending on the skill and experience level of their client regarding the specific behavioral goal they are attempting to modify. For example, a study comparing enabling techniques for exercisers that were classified as novice, intermediate, or expert suggested that specific approaches differentially predicted successful goal initiation and maintenance over time (Hintsa et al., 2025). The researchers identified varying enabling techniques across experience levels: Novices primarily sought information and support, intermediates focused on acceptance and coping strategies, and experts employed environmental restructuring, supportive measures, and incentives for personal growth.

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Practitioner Tips for the Enable Stage

Visualize the Rehearsal of Desired Behaviors and Results

Motor imagery is a conscious mental state during which the representation of a given behavioral movement is rehearsed in working memory without overt motor output. Several studies support the role of mental practice (MP), or rehearsal of behaviors with specific outcomes are an effective technique to enhance neuroplasticity, emotional regulation, and improved task performance (Skottnik & Linden, 2019). Research has shown that visual imagery involves a network of brain areas from the frontal cortex to sensory areas, including activation of the default mode network associated with daydreaming, recalling past experiences, thinking about the future, and considering others' perspectives (R. E. Boyatzis & Jack, 2018).

For example, transcranial magnetic stimulation was used to study the role of changes of the human motor system in the acquisition of new skills, learning a five-fingered exercise on the piano (Pascual-Leone et al., 2005). The first group of participants was told to perform a sequence of finger movements fluently on the piano without pauses and without skipping any keys. They were tested on five consecutive days after a 2-hr practice session using focal transcranial magnetic stimulation to measure how much of the motor cortex controlled the finger movements needed for the piano exercise.

As expected, performance (e.g., number of errors, accuracy, etc.) improved steadily over the course of the 5-day practice period. Once near-perfect performance was reached, the participants were then randomized into two groups, with the first continuing daily piano practice for four subsequent weeks. The second group was only allowed to mentally simulate the exercise without any physical practice on a piano keyboard. Analysis of performance revealed that MP resulted in nearly identical performance compared to the one observed in the group of participants that physically practiced the finger movements on the piano.

Both mental and physical rehearsal demonstrate the potential to enhance similar motor skills applicable to future tasks. For instance, surgeons who participated in video game-based training for more than 3 hr per week made fewer errors, were faster, and scored better overall on laparoscopic and robotic procedures (Gupta et al., 2021). A meta-analysis that included 37 studies and 115 effects confirms that MP has a small but significant positive influence on performance on diverse tasks (r = 0.131; Toth et al., 2020).

Practitioner Tip

Practitioners should encourage their clients to visualize the specific actions needed to achieve their goals, enhancing motivation and commitment to action (default mode network) while also using mental rehearsal task-positive or executive network exercises during their coaching to drive success. The rewiring of our brain is driven by neuroplasticity, which encompasses two key processes: neurogenesis (the formation of new neurons) and synaptogenesis (the development of new connections between neurons). Clients can promote the growth of both of these processes by asking their clients to practice mentally rehearsing specific skills they wish to develop and the specific performance outcomes they desire ("neurons that fire together begin to wire together").

Use the Client's Support System to Reward, Reinforce, and Support Behavior Change Efforts

Social support (instrumental, emotional, informational, appraisal) is critical for successful learning transfer and sustained habit change (Blume et al., 2010; Huang et al., 2015, 2017). Hughes et al. (2020) summarized meta-analytic evidence indicating that social support, recognition, and reinforcement of new behaviors from a client's manager and peers are strongly linked to the sustainability of coaching and training programs. Lazzara et al. (2021) recommended the use of "change champions" to help clients reflect on successes and failures during learning transfer steps of coaching and training (Lazzara et al., 2021). Such individual and peer support can help overcome

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lapses in habit change efforts and provide emotional support to reinforce small changes contributing to long-term goal achievement.

Practitioner Tip

The manager of clients being coached or attending development programs should enable employees to alter their schedules and work activities to facilitate learning transfer and deliberate practice back on the job. Specific and related feedback to the specific behavior change goals by both the practitioner and client's manager will help to shape and reinforce skill development. Practitioners should also encourage their clients to explore creating new projects, assignments, and interactions that enable deliberate practice back on the job with invited feedforward from trusted peers and colleagues. Soliciting and cultivating support from internal and external peers, mentors, and goal champions during a client's development journey can help reduce potential setbacks and enhance ongoing motivation as they strive for long-term success.

Encourage Clients to Select Their Social Support and Goal Mentor Network Very Wisely

The "social ripple effect" related to well-being and lifestyle habits describes how a single individual's change in behavior can significantly influence those in their intimate social circle. Research reveals that our social networks, including neighbors, play an important role in shaping our daily lifestyle choices and health practices. This phenomenon is supported by studies showing that strong social connections can lead to positive changes in diverse behaviors such as diet, alcohol consumption, physical activity, smoking, and overall well-being (Christakis & Fowler, 2013).

Lack of social connection can contribute to negative health behaviors and well-being outcomes. If the people around you are engaging in unhealthy behaviors, you are more likely to do the same, and vice versa (Holt-Lunstad, 2024). In addition, the contribution of social isolation and loneliness has been recognized as a serious health habit impediment by the Office of the Surgeon General (2023). This lack of social connection, networking, and support compromises the benefits of social support (e.g., instrumental, informational, emotional) and contributes to poor health and unsuccessful habit change efforts.

Practitioner Tip

Encourage your client to network and cultivate relationship with others in their life who share the same level of commitment and motivation to engage in positive behavioral change goals. As a result, your client will mirror the habits and behaviors of the people they spend most of their time with. Assigning a coaching exercise such as "My Board of Directors" where your client lists key support members (family, friends, coworkers) who can actively nudge, encourage, track, and monitor their goal success journey can be powerful to define those in their immediate circle who can provide instrumental, emotional, and informational support along the way.

In addition, encourage your clients to share their specific habit and behavior change goals with a broader audience beyond just their immediate "Board of Directors." Research indicates that such sharing can significantly boost motivation and commitment to achieving these goals, especially when communicated to individuals whom your clients perceive as having "higher status" or whose opinions they value deeply (Klein et al., 2020; Nyer & Dellande, 2010).

Enable Deliberate Practice With Clients Long Enough to Establish Successful New Habits/Behaviors

Neuroscience research provides practitioners with a better understanding about how long it takes on average for new behaviors to become comfortable and automatic in their clients. It is important to point out that there is a difference between changes at the neural level (neurogenesis) and actual change in specific observable behaviors (Kleim & Jones, 2008). Research by Lally et al. (2010) suggests that new

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behaviors can become automatic, but it depends on the complexity of what new behavior a client is trying to put into place as well as aspects of their personality.

They studied volunteers who chose to change an eating, drinking, or exercise behavior and tracked them for success. Participants completed a self-report diary, which they entered on a website log, and were asked to try the new behavior each day for 84 days. Their research findings indicated that it took 66 days, on average, for new behavior to become automatic and natural, and the range was anywhere from 18 to 254 days. The mean number of days varied by the complexity of the habit: drinking—59 days; eating—65 days; and exercise—91 days.

Taken together, practitioners and leaders should consider that translating a goal into a new habit for most clients and employees might take longer than expected (approximately 2 months or more of deliberate practice). Additional research using machine learning techniques applied to specific behavior changes (physical activity through gym attendance and handwashing in a hospital setting) confirms that developing habits, on average, takes months rather than weeks as do recent meta-analyses (Buyalskaya et al., 2023; Singh et al., 2024). It is also important to point out that long-term habits can be easily extinguished without continuous repetition and practice over time.

For example, Woollett and Maguire (2011) used neuroimaging to study the neural changes in London taxi drivers given the requirement for exceptional memory, ability to navigate, and learning of over 25,000 city streets. Drivers in London must undergo extensive training over several years, acquiring what is known as "The Knowledge." The authors were able to demonstrate that both taxi drivers and nontaxi drivers activated a key memory area of the brain (hippocampus) during a navigation and scanning procedure, but taxi drivers demonstrated significantly greater gray-matter volume in the hippocampus compared with bus drivers. In addition, expanded gray matter in the posterior hippocampal area was associated in a positive gradient with increasing navigation experience in taxi drivers.

Woollett and Maguire (2011) also explored structural brain changes in drivers who had retired compared with those still actively driving each day. The authors found that full-time drivers had significantly greater gray-matter volume in the posterior hippocampus than retired taxi drivers, who had greater volume in this region than the control participants, who were retired but had not been taxi drivers. Their findings provided some preliminary evidence and support for the possibility of plasticity of the brain (at least in the case of the hippocampus) in both directions—both during acquisition of a new skill or in habit formation and again when the behavior ceases. For practitioners and leaders, the importance of this aspect of neuroplasticity ("use it lose it") has important implications for goal initiation, goal pursuit, and successful behavior change in our clients.

Practitioner Tip

Tracking, monitoring, and evaluating goal progress during habit change journeys are essential for enabling clients to continue successful behavior change (Novemsky & Dhar, 2005; Nowack, 2017). Practitioners should establish regular check-ins with clients to monitor goal progress, utilizing tools such as interviews, pulse surveys with managers and peers, and self-reports from clients to continuously assess changes in observed behaviors throughout the coaching program. It is recommended to prioritize both positive feedback and feedforward guiding clients on what they can do more, less, or differently to foster future success particularly early on in coaching programs (Mashihi & Nowack, 2025; Schroeder & Fishbach, 2015).

Finally, clients should be encouraged to discover personalized methods for setting up automated reminders and nudges to support the retention of their new behaviors and habits. They can also leverage a number of commercially available record-keeping systems and apps to visualize their progress and implement careful monitoring of any lapses or slip-ups to prevent them from escalating into more significant relapses. Practitioners can facilitate discussions with clients about potential regrets they might feel from not achieving their goals, emphasizing the personal benefits and rewards that come from success.

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Recognize the Limits of Deliberate Practice for Your Clients

In a 1996 book co-edited by K. Anders Ericsson and others called "The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance, " the authors conclude that great performance comes mostly from two things: regularly obtaining concrete and constructive feedback and deliberate practice with difficult tasks (A. Ericsson et al., 2016). For example, in one study researchers reported that the best skaters spent 68% of their practice doing really hard jumps and routines compared to those who were less successful (Deakin et al., 2006, p. 308).

A meta-analysis explored the relationship between deliberate practice and performance in several domains (Güllich et al., 2022; Macnamara et al., 2014, 2016). Their research included 111 independent samples, with 157 effect sizes and a total sample of 11,135 participants in various domains (Macnamara et al., 2014). Their findings challenge the common urban myth, asserting that individual differences in expertise and performance are solely determined by the amount of deliberate practice a person engages in over time. For instance, deliberate practice accounted for only 21% of the variance in music and 18% in sports across five specific domains (Macnamara et al., 2014). Certainly, deliberate practice is a necessity, but it is not sufficient to explain individual differences in skills, and it appears that more variance is not explained by deliberate practice than what is explained by it.

Practitioner Tip

Research supports that practice, particularly under pressure, significantly contributes to future high performance (Cabral et al., 2024). For practitioners, promoting the practice of new behaviors with clients does not guarantee high levels of performance, as it must be coupled with authentic and relevant job-related psychological challenges and pressure to be effective. The old adage "practice makes perfect" could be better expressed as "practice under psychological pressure equips you to perform at your best in future high-stress situations." Clients should be encouraged to extend the duration and variety of behaviors they practice in relevant situations back on the job to promote sustainable and meaningful behavior change over the long term.

Utilize Variable Practice Strategies for Enhanced Skill Development

Research indicates that the variability in expertise and successful performance on the job cannot be fully attributed to deliberate practice. Providing specific assignments for clients to practice new techniques and approaches to leading, communicating, and interacting with others will definitely help to sharpen their skills—but only up to a point. Deliberate practice of a newly learning skill is necessary but not sufficient for unconscious automaticity and elite performance, whether it involves either behavioral or mental rehearsal (A. Ericsson & Pool, 2016; Pascual-Leone et al., 1995, 2005). Extensive research across various fields indicates that whereas practice may not lead to perfection, it is positively correlated with substantial improvement:

- Intensive piano practice has been linked to enhanced plasticity in the brain's white-matter regions controlling the speed and coordination of information flow between different brain areas (Bengtsson et al., 2005).

- London taxi drivers experience an increase in the size of the posterior hippocampus, which is crucial for visual–spatial memory, correlating with years of driving experience (Woollett & Maguire, 2011).

- Adults enrolled in juggling courses demonstrate selective structural change in brain areas that are associated with the processing and storage of complex visual motion within just 3 months (Draganski et al., 2004).

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- Doctors with prior video-game experience who continue to play exhibit significantly fewer errors in endoscopic surgery compared to surgeons without any background in video gaming (Rosser et al., 2007).

- Practicing specific mindfulness meditation techniques for 4–8 weeks leads to significant neurophysiological as well as observable structural changes in the brain (Hölzel et al., 2011; Tang et al., 2015).

Practitioner Tip

Encouraging your clients to diversify their practice outside your coaching sessions by incorporating various skills in quick succession (a method known as *interleaving*) has been shown to significantly enhance skill performance and success compared to the repetitive practice of new behaviors alone (Lin et al., 2013; Rohrer et al., 2015). Furthermore, a meta-analysis examining 447 effect sizes from 51 studies with a total of 6,096 athletes, including 772 of the world's elite performers, found that diversified, multidisciplinary practice leads to greater long-term sustainability in the development of specific skills compared to specialized practice that focuses solely on one aspect of behavior (Güllich et al., 2022).

For instance, when helping coaching leaders to improve their listening skills, the coach could go beyond practicing only, reflecting feelings throughout the single session. Instead, they could strategically include other listening techniques such as paraphrasing, acknowledging emotions, and employing open-ended questions to better understand the speaker's perspective. This approach involves intentionally integrating various aspects of active listening during practice sessions rather than isolating and focusing on only one technique at a time.

Conclusion

This article introduces and expands upon evidence-based theories, models, and taxonomies of individual habit and behavior change. It is important to recognize that practitioners who focus on individual behavior change play a vital role in addressing key business needs and directly supporting strategic organizational goals and initiatives. Ultimately, the success of any organizational change effort depends on the collective motivation, personality, neurodiverse capabilities, affective reactions, skills, and abilities of employees to embrace change and effectively modify their habits and behaviors.

Getting clients and employees to initiate and maintain new behaviors that become automatic can be quite challenging, particularly in the face of unpredictable and the rapidly changing challenges facing organizations today (Nowack, 2017). As G. Dai et al. (2025) suggests, a key to successful organizational change processes is highly dependent on how employees perceive and experience such efforts, and this can range from strong resistance to a high level of readiness to modify specific practices, behaviors, and habits in light of both positive and negative emotional reactions they will undoubtedly have. Organizational change will require employees to successfully adapt to a myriad of new routines, processes, and procedures requiring acceptance, a positive mindset, and confidence in coping with expected changes.

The *3E* individual behavior change model (Mashihi & Nowack, 2025; Nowack, 2017) offers practitioners, leaders, and organizations a practical framework for engaging clients and employees at every level. It incorporates evidence-based techniques, strategies, and approaches that promote successful learning transfer and facilitate lasting behavior and habit change. The practical tips summarized in Table 2 can be tailored to address the unique needs of employees by considering factors such as personality, self-efficacy, neurodiversity, age, and work/life stressors. Customizing these strategies helps influence employees' emotional responses to change, supports goal achievement, and promotes successful habit formation.

Although not all clients and employee may have the capability, motivation, opportunities to practice new behaviors, or initially see the personal benefits to initiate such changes, the suggested tips and strategies presented in this article can accelerate professional development across diverse organizational mentoring, coaching, training, succession, and leadership programs.

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Table 2

Practitioner Tips by Specific 3E Individual Change Model Stage

Enlighten change stage	Practitioner tip
Focus on a vision of one's ideal or future self to identify specific behavior change goals	Examine the gap between your client's current strengths and development areas and their envisioned future to enhance readiness to change specific behaviors.
Use 360-degree-feedback assessments with clients to facilitate self-awareness	Incorporate the use of 360-degree-feedback assessments to compare self-ratings to those of other raters (e.g., manager, direct reports, peers) to enhance self-awareness.
Enhance staying mindful and in the moment to facilitate self-awareness	Introduce and ask clients to practice awareness-based mindfulness meditative exercises cultivating present moment awareness of thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations without judgment.
Encourage change stage	**Practitioner tip**
Focus on making goals intrinsically motivating for clients	Utilize motivational interviewing techniques such as the *Readiness Ruler* to increase positive self-talk and commitment to goal setting.
Replace SMART goals with the use of implementation intentions	Use "if-then" goal setting with clients to enhance goal setting and accomplishment (implementation intentions).
Create shorter "middles" with client goals	To address the typical motivational slump in the middle of goal pursuits, have clients create shorter subgoals and shift focus of attention to remaining tasks.
Explore alternate reward and incentive strategies to enhance client motivation	Explore for specific goals and clients the use of alternate rewards and consequence incentives to enhance motivation and commitment (e.g., streaking incentives).
Optimize your client's chronotype for peak performance and productivity (da Vinci moments)	Identify your client's optimal 24-hr alertness and energy time periods during the day to maximize concentration and effort.
Enable change stage	**Practitioner tip**
Visualize the rehearsal of desired behaviors and results	Introduce visualization practice exercises to facilitate goal success and establishment of new routines and behaviors.
Use the client's support system to reward, reinforce, and support behavior change efforts	Build in instrumental, emotional, and informational support from the client's manager, peers, coworkers, and those outside of work based on the specific behaviors being targeted.
Encourage your client to select their social support and goal mentor network very wisely	Analyze the client's existing social support and influence network to encourage, support, reinforce, and celebrate new behavior change efforts and successes.
Enable deliberate practice with clients long enough to establish successful new habits/behaviors	Monitor and evaluate deliberate practice for at 60–90 days with planned relapse prevention strategies to use if necessary.
Recognize the limits of deliberate practice for your clients	Encourage clients to practice new behaviors under high stress, pressure, and challenging job-related situations.
Utilize variable practice strategies for enhanced skill development	Encourage clients to mix up and vary their practice of new behaviors (interleaving) to strengthen neural connections and automaticity of new behaviors and habits.

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