

Get in the habit

We don't have direct control of most of our behaviour. The reality is that whilst we might like to think that we determine our own choices, most of the time the decision is made for us. What I mean by 'us' in this case is our own conscious thought – that is the clear-thinking, logical, human part of our brain whilst what is controlling most of our behaviour is the pre-programmed, emotional, animal part of our brain, our sub-conscious. Most of our behaviour occurs as a result of an instinctive reaction; it has to be - we are not capable of using conscious thought to analyse every situation that arises. This is perhaps easily recognised during routine activities such as driving. When we are learning to drive it takes a huge amount of effort to master the wide range of controls, maintain good observation in all directions and make choices at junctions and roundabouts. Once we have mastered this complex task, we just do it 'without thinking'.

Most people reading this will have got into their car and automatically put on their seat belt. For those of a certain age, I'm sure that this wasn't always the case, but now it has become a habit, you do not need to 'think about it'. The same goes for many safety critical behaviours in the workplace: putting on the PPE, holding the hand rail, checking the guard is in place. Once the behaviour has become a habit it is much more likely that we will follow that behaviour. But beware! We can just as easily establish bad habits: taking the shortcut, not checking the atmosphere before entering the confined space, not wearing the item of protective equipment. Very often these bad habits establish themselves as a result of complacency; the anticipated, unwelcome consequence never materialised plus there was a perceived benefit to be gained from not choosing the safe option – comfort, time saving etc.

Our conscious brain can train our sub-conscious and help us to establish good habits, but it may take time and effort. Anyone who has tried to diet, start a new fitness regime or give up smoking will recognise how difficult it can be. If we make the safe behaviour easier, we'll have more chance of success: provide the PPE at point of use, ensure it is comfortable or looks cool and give positive reinforcement for the safe behaviour.

There is another aspect to be aware of when it comes to this battle between the two parts of our brain and the resultant behaviour. Our sub-conscious behaviour is 'what comes naturally'; this is likely to be what we do when under pressure and do not have time to think. It will most likely be driven by our established attitudes, values and beliefs, which also reside in our sub-conscious. So once again Beware! When under pressure we are likely to choose behaviours based on what we really think rather than what we have thought about and stated publicly. "Safety is our number one priority" states the manager in every meeting but when the pressure is on what he really values and believes will come to the fore.