



## WHY HIDDEN AGENDAS ARE STOPPING YOU FROM STICKING WITH YOUR GOALS

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*Alyson Meister, IMD Professor of Leadership and Organization Behavior, provides a framework for tackling three covert barriers to change that can help bring a transformation to life.*

In January, many of us reflect on the year that's passed, form new goals and think about what we want to change, achieve or overcome in the year ahead. Sadly though, as anyone who has ever made a New Year's resolution likely knows, these intentions – however strong, valued and important they may be – can dissipate quickly, leaving us frustrated and disappointed. You are not alone: behavior change is astonishingly hard.

Setting goals for self-improvement and personal change is important, so that we can leave bad habits behind, continually grow and achieve our true potential. However, a [lack of personal willpower](#) is the most commonly cited barrier to change, along with lack of time or money. While strong and sustained motivation is one important element in the change process, willpower alone is simply not enough. There are a number of other less obvious barriers to change that you should anticipate and address, so as to boost your odds of turning intention into reality in 2021.

### **Acknowledge and address hidden agendas**

Even if you know what you want to achieve and are motivated, hidden agendas might be blocking your progress. Also known as [competing commitments](#), hidden agendas can surface as a tension between long and short-term goals. To really make change stick you'll need to be honest with yourself and make some tough choices. If you're motivated yet seem to sabotage your own progress regularly, you may need to acknowledge and confront what you covertly want more, or what is more painful to give up, than the important change you're actually trying to make.

### **Change your context, change yourself**

It's a collection of macro and micro choices that will accumulate to bring your desired change to life. Our choices, behaviors and decisions are greatly influenced by the [situation](#) we're immersed in. So if you change your context, you change yourself.

This context includes not only physical surroundings, but also social surroundings. So consider what behavioral and emotional patterns your context and the people that surround you enable and lock you into. Take, for example, the goal of switching off from work to be a more present parent or partner at home. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic, the physical location change between work and home helped this change to happen naturally. Now, the boundary between work and home is blurred.

Overcoming this context might entail starting new routines to switch off, such as getting outside for a five-minute [“fake commute”](#) around the block to disconnect from work, or putting your smartphone or laptop away. Out of sight, out of mind.

Meanwhile, decades of research shows that emotional states are [contagious](#). If you work in an environment characterized by stress and anxiety, it is likely to be a challenge for you to reach a goal to be a more positive person, for example. In this case, you’ll need to spend more time with colleagues that exude the behaviors you want to adopt. This advice holds true for any goal.

In addition, Nobel laureate [Richard Thaler suggests](#), “if you want people to do something, make it easy”. This suggests that people tend to naturally follow the path of least resistance when given a choice. For example, if you want to eat healthier, make the apples easily accessible and the chocolate more difficult to find. If you want to read more books and spend less time on social media, leave your phone on the opposite side of the house and keep the book handy. Consider what nudges you can create in your surroundings to make your desired change easier. Work out what temptations and triggers in your environment might nudge you into old patterns of behavior.

### **Embrace feeling uncomfortable - and sometimes – inauthentic**

How we think and act will become hard-wired, habitual patterns based on neural pathways in our brain. In fact, research suggests that more than a third of our daily behaviors are [habitual](#). Thinking or acting differently takes considerable time, and only with constant repetition can we form new neural pathways that ensure a new behavior or mindset becomes the new normal.

Moreover, any change to our identity or sense of self can feel threatening, even if it’s a welcome change. For example, the challenge of stepping up to take on a new role, moving to a new country, or trying out new leadership styles, can feel uncomfortable and make us feel [inauthentic](#), or even fake. This awkwardness can quickly send us back to our well-worn habits that feel safe and comfortable, but it is also a very normal part of the change process. It is important to acknowledge and embrace this process, and to experiment and practice new behaviors just as you would when you’re learning a new sport, skill, or language.

As you begin to set the new year’s goals and resolutions, your willpower alone may not be enough to see them through. Tackling three covert barriers to change — neural pathways, contexts and hidden agendas — is the key to true transformation.