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the art of contribution: coaching for big-picture thinkers

Embodying Your Intention: How New Habits Shape New Possibilities

By Julie Harris

Ready to do something different? You'll want to work with your body.

Your Body Speaks



Have you ever had the experience of listening to someone whose words you did not believe? In all likelihood, it was because their body was telling you something else. Maybe their eyes shifted from side to side, or they held their arms behind their back. How about the opposite experience? Think about someone whose words made a strong impression on you. Try to picture how this person's body told a story that mirrored or complemented their voice.

Both people in these examples had a message that they were trying to convey, but the second person's intentions were embodied. There was coherence to his or her communication that put power and meaning behind the words that were said.

The word "intention" is derived from Latin; its roots mean "an extending; stretch out; lean toward." Intention inherently contains movement, forward momentum. It's not about what we think we are going to do. It is what we are actively engaged in stretching toward.

When someone's words and body language don't match, we question their intention. Their words may be stretching toward one thing, but their body appears to be stretching toward something else. When there's a match between words and body, the effect is magnified. You might not remember the exact words that someone used, but you *will* remember the feeling and the impact that this person had on you.

Your body speaks volumes about your intention.



Manifesting Intention Through Your Body

When you are clear about what you intend, and you have regularly practiced fulfilling that intention, it becomes embodied as a habit. By embodied, I mean that it is such a part of you that you cannot help but express it. When an intention is truly embodied, your body literally knows what to do at the appropriate time.

Let's talk about a basic example, like walking. Once upon a time, you couldn't walk. You crawled or scooted, or someone carried you from place to place. At some point, you had a desire to get around on your own steam without getting your knees dirty. You wanted to walk.

So how did you do it?



You watched other people. They seemed to do something involving their feet. You experimented and practiced, holding on to the edge of the sofa, or grandpa's hands. For a while you teetered and wobbled, until one day, you could pretty much keep your balance and forward momentum going.

And then all of a sudden, the world was a different place. You could get from here to there pretty quickly. You could see more and touch more from your new, vertical vantage point. You could walk

around in public places where mom or dad wouldn't dare have let you crawl. You felt a lot more independent. You weren't a baby anymore, you were a toddler.

Unbelievable as it sounds, not long after all that effort, you barely had to think about walking. Walking and all that it represented to you was completely embodied. By learning to move in this new way, other possibilities started to open up to you. Running, hopping, and climbing were next on your agenda...all because you had the intention to get around more independently, and manifested that intention by developing the embodied habit of walking.

What is a Habit?

If our intentions are embodied as habits, then what exactly is a habit?

A habit is a behavior that is regularly repeated until it requires little conscious attention to complete. For example, every morning I get up, brush my teeth, and eat breakfast. These habits are useful – I can save my brain power for more creative tasks rather than wondering how I should start my day.

There are three important things to think about when developing a new habit:

1. *Habits require practice before they become second nature.* If you've ever had to give a child daily reminders about hygiene, you know that it takes consistent effort (from both you and the child!) to establish even basic actions as habitual behavior.



2. *New habits initially require a great deal of cognitive and physical attention.* When you're five, it takes all of your concentration to make bunny ear loops with your shoelaces. Now, you can hold a conversation while tying your shoes. At sixteen, driving a car in the parking lot is a rough operation with lots of fits and starts. Now, you just hop into your car and go!
3. *Habits create the framework for what you are capable of in the current moment.* For example, firefighters train in a certain set of actions so that when an emergency strikes, they have access to a wide range of streamlined responses. A trained firefighter can think creatively and respond appropriately to many emergency situations. The average person may be capable of helping out with a fire emergency, but will probably not be as quick or effective. Or, an untrained person may freeze because they feel overwhelmed by a situation for which they have no habitual frame of reference.

How Habits Live in Our Minds and Bodies

Although some of your habits are in your conscious awareness, and may even occur to you as traits that you identify with or feel proud of (you may know that you always get to meetings on time, or that you easily talk to new people wherever you go), other habits are so ingrained that you don't even realize when you're doing them.

Two years ago I was facilitating a workshop soon after Hurricane Sandy, when many people lost electrical power for up to two weeks. In our discussion about habits, one woman remembered that during the time she had no electricity, she observed herself walking into a room and moving



her arm up to flick on the lights. Although she cognitively knew that the power was off, her body remembered the habit of turning on the lights when walking into a dark room. This recollection left her with a strong impression of how quickly her body processes and responds to certain stimuli before her mind has time to weigh in to see if it actually makes sense.

If your unconscious habit is trying to turn on a light switch when there's no power, you may find it to be a small annoyance or a source of amusement. But in your relationships or your work, having unconscious ways of reacting may be limiting you from reaching a new stage of growth.

Your tendency to move in certain ways in reaction to a particular stimulus are partially written in your body through genetics, and then reinforced or modified through the experiences you have, and what you practice. When you're young, you're in a constant state of laying down new pathways in your brain as you learn and develop habits. These patterns live in your muscles and your nervous system, stimulated by chemical signals designed to protect you and bond you to other human beings. Over time, these pathways and chemical responses manifest as habits, most of which are running in the background of your experience. As an adult, barring any radical or deliberate changes in your environment and experiences, your habits tend to stay relatively stable



– the body likes to maintain homeostasis. This is how you can begin to feel stuck, like you can't figure out how the contribution that you know is inside you can be revealed and put into action. That's when it's time to think about which habits are working for you now, and which ones are no longer contributing to your growth and evolution.

Do Something Different

Becoming “unstuck” from a habitual train of thoughts and actions requires two key skills:

1. *Self-observation*: Building the attentional capacity to notice a habitual behavior in a particular area of your life.
2. *Practice*: Building the physical capability to express a different intention.

Self-Observation

In order for a new intention to fully manifest as action, you first need to cultivate an awareness of what you are currently doing. Since many of our habits are operating in the background, we are often surprised at what we find when we make it our work to notice what we're up to. Once you can observe how you're behaving in the here and now, you can consider stretching toward something in a different way.



For example, let's say that you come to coaching with a concern that although you are really busy at work, you feel as if you are not really accomplishing what matters to you. After some discussion, we decide that for a few weeks, you will observe how you make decisions. You'll stop several times a day to see how you make decisions of any type: simple (e.g. what should I eat for breakfast?), complex, work-related, or personal. To the best of your ability, you'll try to remain nonjudgmental and curious about what you find, because the purpose of self-observation is to see what's happening, not to change it or pass judgment. You'll consider these kinds of questions:

- What do I pay most attention to in making a decision? Least attention? (e.g. my thoughts, my emotions, my gut feelings, others' thoughts or feelings?)
- Do I tend to look at issues holistically, with multiple inputs, or do I tend to focus on one driving factor to make the decision?
- To what extent do I consider how satisfying my decisions will be to me, and to what extent do I consider how my decisions will affect others, or how they will look to others?
- How confident or how unsure do I feel about the decisions I make?
- Do I decide quickly or slowly?
- Do I plan my decisions in advance, or do I wait until I absolutely must decide about something to do so?



After two weeks of self-observation, you notice two main themes:

1. You are more often than not making decisions very quickly, as things come up. You rarely have time to sit down and think through an issue.
2. You pay a lot of attention to how other people will feel about the decisions you make. You second-guess what you want because you are attending more to others' feelings and concerns than to your own.

Practice

Based on what you've learned in your self-observation, you are beginning to see more clearly that your habitual patterns around decision-making are preventing you from having the space and the confidence to make decisions that help you to accomplish what matters to you. The next step is to start practicing something different with your body – to create a different experience for your body so that you can manifest a different intention.

The first practice might be around Creating Space. This could look like starting a daily 15-20 minute meditation practice or taking a daily nature walk. It might feel like a radical experiment, the idea that you could tackle your busy schedule by learning to pause or take a break from the action.

The second practice might be about connecting more deeply with your heart. You might stop a few times a day and spend three minutes with your hand on your heart, inquiring as to what matters to you now. Another possibility would be to combine these two new actions and give yourself 30 minutes a day (space) to do whatever you feels right for you (trusting your own inner guidance, what matters to you now).

Putting it Together

Now that you've increased your awareness through self-observation, and begun practicing new habits, how does this translate into your day-to-day life?

By increasing your self-awareness, you gain the ability to sense when an old habit is about to be triggered. Initially, you might not notice that you've spent the whole day without a break, concerned more with others' feelings than your own, until after the fact. Eventually, you might catch yourself in the middle of making a decision that feels rushed or is not grounded in what matters to you. Finally, you'll be able to notice the thoughts, emotions, or sensations that trigger that particular behavior pattern. By practicing a new habit, you create the possibility that you could make a different choice at the point of being triggered. Your body has begins to learn how to do something different. You can pause and step into a new behavior that can significantly change the pattern that has left you feel dissatisfied and disempowered. If you practice enough, your new habit will become embodied, and you'll instinctively know to take time to access your inner guidance before you make an important decision.

Just as running might only have appeared in your awareness as something you could do after you mastered walking, the idea of being able to create more space and tap into your own inner guidance in your work may only appear as a real possibility once you've begun to practice these



actions in lower risk situations. Now, you might consider how you can implement these practices at work – like setting aside time on your calendar for planning and making important decisions, requesting the support of others so that you can think undisturbed during your planning time, and pausing to check in with what matters to you before you make final decisions on critical issues. You also may need to learn other skills, like how to make and respond to requests, to support your ability to practice your new habits at work. You may be surprised to find that creating space and accessing inner guidance start to feel more natural to you, and that more fully embodying those qualities allow new possibilities to come into your life that you had never imagined before.

New Habits = New Possibilities

Our bodies are powerful. They have the power of holding onto habits that have supported us and protected us for many, many years, and they also have the power to learn new habits and adapt to what we need and want now. By bringing our conscious attention to how our intentions manifest in our bodies, we create the conditions to channel that power and align it with our desire to make our best contribution to the world. Because our bodies are so powerful, working with ourselves on this level enables us to make more lasting changes, see more creative possibilities, and step into new actions and areas of contribution.

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Acknowledgements: Many of the ideas in this paper have been formed and informed through my studies and practice over the last ten years. In particular, I am grateful to the work of James Flaherty and New Ventures West; Don Riso, Russ Hudson and the Enneagram Institute; Jessica Dibb and Alice Wells of Inspiration Community; and Vishali Varga and Yoga Montclair. I've also been influenced by other rich perspectives on the power of the body to create new possibility, including the work of A.H. Almaas, Pema Chodron, Donna Farhi, Eugene Gendlin, Daniel Goleman, Anodea Judith, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Judith Lasater, Peter Levine, Wendy Palmer, Richard Strozzi, and Twyla Tharp.

