

An abstract graphic in shades of blue. A large, dark blue circle is positioned at the top. Below it, a stylized hand with five fingers is shown, holding the bottom of the circle. The hand and fingers are composed of several parallel, curved lines of varying lengths, creating a sense of depth and movement. The background is a lighter shade of blue.

From the Leadership Mastery Suite

4R TECHNIQUE FOR CHANGING HABITS

This technique is reprinted from chapter 11 of **The Three Levels of Leadership: *How to Develop Your Leadership Presence, Knowhow and Skill*** (2nd ed.) by James Scouller



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4R Technique

Register - Reframe - Refocus - Reaffirm

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Limiting cognitive, emotional and behavioural habits – for example, avoiding contact with other people even when it would help you as a leader to be more visible, reach out, talk and include others – stem from powerful limiting self-image beliefs, e.g. “*I’m a nobody so strangers will ignore me if I approach them and that will be terrible*” and, perhaps, from an associated worldview, e.g. “*People think I’m insignificant*”. Over time, these beliefs spawn thinking, feeling and behavioural patterns that defend you from these frightening ideas. As you repeat these patterns they become habits that live as neural circuits in your brain (because “neurons that fire together wire together”).

These habits (neural circuits) usually remain – although in weakened form – even after you’ve found, defined, understood and dissolved your key limiting beliefs. Why? Think of forming a habit as like creating a large snowball on the upslope of a hill. As you push upwards, the snowball grows. Now imagine you reach the peak and start descending the downslope. You no longer have to push the snowball; momentum and gravity mean it rolls by itself. So it is with your habits. The original cause, the limiting belief, may have gone, but the momentum persists from continued use of your neural circuits. Thus, faced with old triggers (certain people or circumstances) the old circuits can fire into life, dragging you into your old behaviours, which is why we usually need 4R following cognitive work on a limiting belief.

The key to changing habits is not to resist them, *but to substitute them with new habits*. So the principles under-lying 4R are: *disidentification* (applied mindfulness), *will* and *repeated substitution*. The idea is to notice the old habit, interrupt it and substitute it with something positive, repeatedly, until new habits form.

NOTE: You must create the base for applying 4R by continuing to practise mindfulness meditation for at least 10 minutes every day. Then you’ll find it easier to complete the critical first step, Register, under pressure. Without that first step, nothing else can happen. The four steps:

Register

- Become aware in the moment of your urge to launch limiting behaviour.
- Urges appear in many ways. The urge to avoid contact with others. Or to stay silent and low-profile when you’re in a meeting. Or to over-control. Or to avoid being decisive and taking responsibility. Or to become diverted by thoughts and feelings that have nothing to do with your original intent and waste time. Or to avoid saying what you are really thinking. Or to fly into a rage. Or whatever your particular limiting habit is.
- You may notice this as an idea, a thought, an emotion or a body sensation.
- This is mindfulness under pressure. It’s the act of noticing what’s happening in your mind or body as it’s happening without judging it or getting swept along by it.
- REMINDER: this step will only work for you if you’re building a base of daily mindfulness practice.

Reframe

- Reframing means *altering the meaning you give to an inner or outer experience, making it easier to change your response to it* and move on to Refocus. This means you don't argue with the thought, feeling or impulse – or try to push it away. Instead you *render it irrelevant* by reframing; it's not you, it's just your brain doing what it does.
- You realise the old momentums are still there in your brain even if you've already dissolved the belief that caused this thinking/ feeling/behaving pattern. This is because you haven't yet substituted the old neural pathways (representing old habits) with new habits.
- Consider a forest path. The first person to walk through the forest has to put in effort to clear a path for herself. The second walker finds it easier because she follows the first person's route. And the third and fourth walkers follow the same path without thinking. So it is with your neural pathways as you create and reinforce habits. You'll follow the old path automatically *unless you practise creating a new one*. Until then, the brain will do what it's always done and follow well-worn pathways.
- It's helpful, where possible, to recognise the connection between the impulse and the belief you have dissolved. So you tell yourself, *"Oh, there it goes again, it's just my brain firing up and following the old pathway through the forest. But I don't have to follow it. It's just a neural relic of my old so-and-so belief, the one I dissolved."*
- If you haven't yet dissolved the belief – or you don't know what it is yet – tell yourself it's just an old habit showing up as neurons mistakenly firing in your brain.
- If it helps, imagine a neural image of your brain. See the unwanted impulse as just a misfiring of your brain, or as your brain "going off on one" as we say in English slang.
- Reframe is crucial in helping you bridge between Register and Refocus when under pressure. Most clients undervalue this step, but it's essential for creating psychological space to get to the third step, Refocus.
- TIP: imagine part of your brain is misfiring or "short-circuiting" as you reframe.

Refocus

- Now you focus on how you want to be *and/or* how you want to act or feel *and/or* what your original intent was *and/or* – if you didn't have one – what it is now. This is will in action.
- The key is to have a *well-formed* intent; that is, a wise outcome. This means being clear both on the outcome you want and how you'll stay in relation with the other person (or give yourself the best chance of doing so).
- Note what's going on here: you're not *pushing away* or *resisting* the old urge/habit. Rather, you are *substituting* it by focusing your attention on the new behaviour (new habit). This is the key to changing habits. We know from neuroscience that to change habits the secret is to overwrite them; not resist them. This causes the old habit circuits to die away from inattention. But it means practising new habits: you have to put the work in.

Reaffirm

- Finally, repeat to yourself an affirmation statement that works for you, to give you a final push if you need it.
- It could be a statement specific to the belief. Or it could be a general purpose statement like, *"I have beliefs, emotions and limiting behavioural habits, but I am not them. I'm more than them. I am a Self; a centre of pure awareness, pure will and pure imagination."* The key is to use *"I am..."* statements before any *"I can..."* statements. *"I am"* is more powerful than *"I can"*. Why? Because your ability (I can) to do something depends on how you see yourself (I am).
- Later on, you may find a simple statement like, *"Come on, do it now!"* is enough.

Supplementing 4R with Mental Rehearsal

The brain doesn't distinguish between physical activity and mental activity. So you don't have to wait for the "pressure" situation to arise. You can imagine it happening and then *imagine* yourself applying 4R successfully. For more on mental rehearsal, read pages 288-291 of **The Three Levels of Leadership** (second edition).

