

OLIVER FOO

HEAD

TO

HEART

TO

HABIT



WHY 90% OF EFFORTS AT BEHAVIOURAL
CHANGE FAIL AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT

Praise for *Head to Heart to Habit*

“I loved this book. Full of thought-provoking yet practical ideas. Oliver’s rich real-world experience makes it so credible and insightful. And so well written. My new ‘go-to’ reference!”

— NICOLE GIONET

Chairperson, Marichette Foundation

Former Chief HR Officer, Alcatel-Lucent

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“Read and keep this book close to you. It will help you discover the best version of yourself and lay the foundations for success in both your professional and personal lives.”

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“As a global business leader, one of the most challenging tasks I faced was not so much developing a strategy for the future, but to bring people along, inspire belief, and build the muscle and discipline to create sustainable change. Oliver’s book provides a practical and powerful way to translate vision into behaviours.”

— KENNETH CHAN

Former President, McDonald’s Greater China
Author of *Asians in Charge*

HEAD TO HEART TO HABIT

WHY 90% OF EFFORTS AT
BEHAVIOURAL CHANGE FAIL
AND HOW TO OVERCOME IT

Oliver Foo

 **Marshall Cavendish**
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For my mother –
who despite losing her own mother as a toddler,
and restricted mobility in her late 90s now,
is still the most positive person I know.

For Joyce, Brandon and Rachel –
who occupy the bulk of my own *Heart*.

CONTENTS

Foreword by Allen Lew	9
Introduction: 90-10	15
1 Being Fat With Two Blind Spots	23
2 Head to Heart to Habit Framework	31
3 Head: Willpower Gets Us Started	61
4 Heart: Motivation Gets Us Going	67
5 Habit: Momentum Gets Us Growing	121
6 Putting It All Together	161
7 Managers and Partners, Take Heed	181
8 Final Thoughts	201
Glossary	203
Notes	207
Acknowledgements	215
About the Author	216

FOREWORD

ALLEN LEW

“Change is *not* a constant.” Change instead is accelerating every single day.

Oliver Foo makes this point early in this book. I wholeheartedly agree. Think of how the global landscape has changed in a few short years.

Simultaneous all-out military conflicts in Europe and the Middle East threaten not just regional but global stability. Generative AI has arrived with a bang and will potentially impact every single job. A global pandemic killed millions and upended almost every aspect of life as we know it.

Add to this list a more fragile USA-China relationship, accelerated climate change and the dizzying pace at which technology continues to evolve.

Consultants sometimes use a so-called STEEP model to analyse the impact of changes to organisations in five domains: Social, Technological, Economic, Environmental and Political. It’s not my intention to go into any detail of this model. I raise this to make three points.

First, a change in just one domain can have a huge impact in the way organisations operate. Second, every single

event mentioned above has on its own brought changes to some domains. Third, put the events all together and it is clear there are significant changes in all five domains. Their combined disruptive impact on organisations is undeniable. The worse news is that we can expect future waves of change to come even more frequently.

In this onslaught of change, organisations must be more resilient to change. The resilience I speak of isn't so much one of an immovable force bravely facing the winds of change, emerging unscathed. I speak more of an agile and nimble entity adapting readily to new challenges. The commonly used image of bamboo stems that bend with the wind while strongly anchored to the ground is even more relevant now.

So what makes an organisation resilient like bamboo?

A lot of it is about its people. Sure, a company's strategies and processes must cater for changes in the marketplace. But it is employees who execute on strategies and processes. Agile and resilient employees are motivated employees. Motivated employees stay in a company not just because of the salary; they stay because they feel they belong and see potential for growth and empowerment. Motivated employees coupled with a strong value proposition from the company are the biggest indicator of satisfied customers. And this cannot be overstated: satisfied customers are a company's competitive advantage.

What will make a workforce agile and resilient? What will make employees give their all and forge a new path in the face of adversity? If that is the end we seek, what is the beginning?

It all begins with an agile and resilient leader.

The model of a CEO or senior leader who needs only to focus on strategy and leave the execution to a COO or project director is long out of date. Leaders need to be equally adept at both strategy *and* execution. But even this powerful two-pronged combination of competency in the domains of *What* (strategy) and *How* (execution) needs a booster shot.

The art of execution in the workplace used to be focused on three things: setting clear objectives, keeping everyone aligned and keeping progress on track. Set targets, set incentive structures and crack the whip. This is now complicated by an environment of accelerating change.

While rapid changes are viewed by older workers as "change", younger workers view them as "normal" and have wholly different expectations. An older worker may prefer to meet face to face, while younger workers are perfectly happy texting or meeting via Zoom, with the video disabled. What might clearly be an incentive to someone might be interpreted as a disincentive by their teams. In short, there is now greater potential for an "understanding" or "interpretation" gap between leaders and the teams they lead, or even amongst teammates.

In this ever-evolving mix of change and new expectations, I'll add a third prong that leaders need to master: the ability to understand their own and their team's intrinsic motivations, and from there to shape their own behaviour to shape the behaviours of the people they lead. *Agile and resilient leaders enable agile and resilient employees.*

Leaders need to listen, clarify, understand, decide, cajole, reprimand, course-correct and motivate – sometimes all in the

same meeting. And throughout it all, they must be anchored in and showcase their company values. But here's the challenge: unless you understand your own intrinsic motivations – your *Why* – it will be very difficult to consistently address your team's motivations. On the flip side, if you manage to do so, your team will follow you through thick and thin.

So how can a leader get better at understanding their own and their team's motivations, to then shape their own and their team's behaviours?

The “Head to Heart to Habit” framework is a powerful new tool you can add to your leadership toolbox. It'll help you understand what drives your motivations and behaviours at work. It'll also guide you to change your behaviours to support your goals. Mastered well, you will engage and lead your employees better. Mastered well, this framework could be one of your most oft-used tools.

And the same message goes out not just to leaders; it is equally applicable to employees and individual contributors. The framework will allow you to understand yourself and your stakeholders – your colleagues, your bosses, your clients and your partners – that much better. It will also guide you to take the steps needed to make meaningful changes in your behaviour to get to your goals.

One final message. In a 40-plus-year career where I've been privileged to lead organisations in multiple countries, one thing stands out to me as an important enabler of success. The ones who succeed are those who continually strive to acquire knowledge, to be better and to then venture.

The ideas presented by Oliver within these pages are not merely aspirational; they are practical and actionable steps for leaders to think, act and live, so they can be the best version of themselves. And so that the people and companies they lead can be the champions of their respective industries. Give it a go – you will see the impact!

In all your pursuits, I wish you the very best.

Allen Lew is the Chairman of Certis Group, and a board member of Raffles Medical Group, Citibank Singapore Limited, and the Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore. He was formerly Executive Chairman of Excom AIS Thailand, CEO of Optus Australia and CEO of Singtel Singapore.

INTRODUCTION

90-10

Let me start with two noteworthy quotes from the world of treating heart patients.

If you look at people after coronary-artery bypass grafting two years later, 90% of them have not changed their lifestyle. (Dr Edward Miller, Dean of Medical School and CEO of hospital at Johns Hopkins University, 2004)

And 15 years later, despite easy access to great medical advice on what needs to be done ...

Less than 10% of heart failure patients comply with advice on salt and fluid restrictions, daily weighing, and physical activity. (European Society of Cardiology, 2019)

I first learnt in 2011 that only about 10% of heart patients change their lifestyle post-treatment – the very lifestyle that played a major role in causing their heart disease.

I was driving a Sales Excellence programme across Asia-Pacific (APAC) in the multi-national company I worked for then. An external training consultant shared with me that unless we looked at skills development more holistically – using the heart patient anecdote to illustrate the point – we were doomed to fail. He didn't put it quite so starkly, but the point stuck.

How is it possible that even with a matter literally relating to life and death, 90% of heart patients do not change their behaviour? How could they be so cavalier with their life choices?

Or so I thought.

* * *

Originally trained as an engineer, my first job was as a coder, or software engineer as we were called back in the 1980s. After six years, I moved into sales and marketing. My new company supplied telecommunications companies (telcos) with the network equipment needed to provide their mobile and broadband services.

This new world of engaging with clients directly was as different from my old world of coding as could be. In coding, we sought stability and predictability. A well-written piece of software behaves exactly as we want it to every single time. In sales and marketing, no two engagements with clients are alike.

The whole process of understanding a client's challenges, their internal decision-making process, and their formal and informal power structures fascinated me. What did

my clients do before they made their decisions? How did they seek and process information? How did they follow through on a decision?

Thus began a life-long interest in understanding organisational and individual behaviour. I often paid as much attention to the thought process of the person negotiating with me from across the boardroom table as I did their business issues and my company's products and services.

Along the way, I noticed a certain select breed of executives who seemed to be "multi-competent". Ask them to deep-dive and project-manage the company's digitalisation project, and after a shaky start, they find a way to have the wind on their backs and embrace the PM role with ease. Appoint them head of sales a couple years later, and they also become adept at building client relationships and understanding their issues. Throw them into tough negotiations in a boardroom and they figure out a way to thrive.

My left brain kept asking a few questions. Why do some people adapt so well to new challenges? How do the same people acquire new skills and behaviours so easily?

Conversely, why do so many others fail to change – like 90% of heart patients – even when they know the consequences of not changing? Why is adaptability so elusive to them? This wasn't a case of them having a *Fixed Mindset*, where one believes that abilities are fixed and innate qualities. Many of my very intelligent and competent colleagues who really invested in acquiring a new behaviour at work, struggled to do so when they moved into a new role.

Fast forward 30-plus years from the rookie coder to the present, and it's now clear to me. Behavioural change is a skill we can learn – but the bulk of us have been taught it incorrectly!

The challenge stems from the way we are often trained to think about behavioural change only from the *Intellectual* perspective. It doesn't help that companies and industry at large often design their leadership development or change management programmes around *What* to do. To lead or communicate better at work, we are trained to listen more, understand everyone's views, ask good questions and explain our decisions by providing data to back our position. This is *What* we need to do, they keep telling us.

But *What* alone is seldom sufficient. And unfortunately, rare is the programme that invites us to look at acquiring skills beyond the *What*.

What does this book cover?

This book guides us to look at behavioural change from three perspectives: *What* (Intellectual), *Why* (Emotional) and *How* (Execution). I will be introducing a framework that I have developed for behavioural change called **Head to Heart to Habit (HHH)**. The **HHH** Framework will help you change your attitudes and behaviours – and sustain them – to get to your goals.

Who is this book meant for?

I have two answers for this question.

The first answer is: anyone who wants to achieve a goal or a behavioural change for themselves.

This book will help you understand what may have been impeding your success. You will learn how you can sustainably make behavioural changes that will get you to your goal.

My second answer is: Leaders and HR Business Partners will also benefit greatly from knowledge of this framework, to guide direct reports or colleagues on their change journeys. This book will help you understand the challenges they face. Leaders, you will need to know how to help them navigate every phase of their change journey.

I have successfully applied the **HHH** Framework in a wide range of contexts, including:

- A CEO trying to get two members of his Excom – the Head of Sales and the Head of Products – and their respective departments to blame each other less and collaborate more.
- A recently promoted Regional Head of Operations trying to confidently lead former peers, most of whom were older and more experienced than she was, and some of whom she used to work for.
- A Department Head managing and keeping a team of high-potential Gen Zs on task, only to receive a surprisingly bad Employee Engagement score and observe the start of a worrying trend of resignations.

- A senior Civil Service Officer transitioning to the private sector, where corporate culture is much different from the regimented one he was used to.
- A founder CEO of a start-up, finding that managing investors and staff are two very different kettles of fish.
- A superstar Sales Executive struggling to be the sales team leader that he'd been promoted to, and slowly realising that managing a team of aggressive sales persons is a completely different job.
- A veteran Project Director leading for the first time a virtual team from different divisions and different countries, and noticing gaps in the project specifications and differences between work cultures.
- A father building a better relationship with his teenage son, and realising that as the boy grew into a young adult, "telling" him what to do was neither effective nor welcome.
- An Executive Coach seeking a framework to guide coachees on their change journey.

While I've drawn on my experience in industry, and many of the examples I give are focused on the workplace, the **HHH** Framework is equally applicable to non-work-related behavioural change.

To bring the concepts to life in this book, I have woven in relevant stories from my own journey and interactions with clients, colleagues and friends. Of course, to protect each individual's privacy, I have changed their names.

One last note: This book introduces a number of concepts and terms. To help you navigate this, the **Glossary** at the end of the book serves as a convenient place to refresh or check your understanding of the concepts.

I have found success with this framework – as an individual, as a leader and as an executive coach. Whatever your context, I hope you will too.

CHAPTER 1

BEING FAT WITH TWO BLIND SPOTS

*“We all have a blind spot ...
shaped exactly like us.”*

— JUNOT DIAZ

Most New Year’s resolutions fail before February

January 2008. I was working at a global telco equipment supplier in Singapore. I enjoyed my job, liked interacting with my team and had an office environment that empowered me. My typical work schedule entailed long hours in the office, entertaining clients about twice a week, travelling on business two to three times a month and sleeping probably six hours a night.

One rainy morning in Brunei, after yet another unnecessarily long late-night conference call the night before, an

unfamiliar number stared up at me from the hotel bathroom scale. Without realising it, I had put on 5 kg in a little over 10 months.

I'm not sure what it was about this incident, but a sudden wave of tiredness came over me. 2007, and the close of the fourth quarter in particular, had been incredibly hectic. The company was a year into a major merger with a former competitor. As in the early stages of most major mergers, things were messy. We had to quickly streamline the merged entity, decide who would keep key roles, which solution suite would continue and what new processes to adopt. Many people lost their jobs and many of those who remained struggled amidst an unhealthy display of insecurity and ego. More importantly, we had to convince our clients to stick with us as other competitors took advantage of our internal "distractions".

It was my second year as country head and I had thrown everything at my disposal into meeting my targets. As the senior country officer of the Singapore office with 400 staff, my pride would not let me fail. I'd driven the team hard. As to be expected, the team was tired. *I was tired.* Thinking back, I had also fallen ill a number of times throughout the year. Each time I caught a bug, what used to take a couple nights of good sleep to shake off would often take more than a week to recover from. With no extended year-end break and an 18-month-old toddler son at home, somehow the new year – and all its expectations of new targets – weighed heavily on me.

As I stared at the bathroom scale, a thought came to me: *I need to get more healthy. I'm tired of being tired.*

The thing is, not being a big fellow, 5 kg overweight is significant. Being a disciplined person though, my next decision was natural: to put willpower to work. I resolved to sleep more, exercise more, be more careful about my diet, and lose the 5 kg over five months. The specific task, my inner voice said, would be to average seven hours of sleep a night, run for 30 minutes twice a week and reduce my carbohydrate intake by halving my rice consumption.

The weekend found me struggling through my first 30-minute run in years. The run itself was agony but it felt great after. *That felt good. I'll run again mid-week.* Also, instead of a full serving of carbs – rice in my case – I opted for a half-portion at each meal.

Monday came and work became all-consuming again. While I tried to go to bed by 11 p.m., my mind was too active for me to fall asleep. Mid-week flew by without the second run of the week. By the end of the week, my rice consumption was reduced for sure, but only because I had started a series of Chinese New Year celebrations with my clients, involving lunches and dinners that overfed everyone with *lo hei* (a Singaporean concoction of raw fish salad), noodles and desserts.

The next weekend, I ran for another 30 minutes. I ran more slowly this time, hated the run a little less and again felt the endorphin high after. Though my knees were a little sore, it still felt good generally. Monday evening came and found me on a flight for a regional meeting. Three days later, I flew home, having not done the mid-week run, a little sleep-deprived, probably a half kilogram heavier and slightly hungover from the numerous networking events.

Fast forward a few months and by June 2008, I was still sleeping no more than six hours a night, running perhaps once or twice a month and my weight had crept up a further 1 kg.

I don't recall being disappointed, just puzzled. Getting more healthy was important to me. Deep down I knew I wanted to. Yet I'd failed on each of the three health metrics (sleep, exercise and diet) I'd set for myself. The logical part of me put it down to my being busy at work and not being focused enough on this goal. *If I really focused on it, I'd get back on track.*

Two blind spots

What I didn't realise then was that I had two major blind spots.

Some readers would have heard of the four stages of learning a new skill.

- Stage 1: Unconsciously Incompetent
- Stage 2: Consciously Incompetent
- Stage 3: Consciously Competent
- Stage 4: Unconsciously Competent

In Stage 1, we start off as a complete novice where we are Unconsciously Incompetent. We have no skills at all in a certain domain and are not aware that we do not possess any skills.

After getting some lessons or doing some research, we move to Stage 2, where we are Consciously Incompetent. In this stage, we are still executing incorrectly. Importantly

though, we know what we are doing wrong and what we need to do to get on the right track.

After a few weeks, months or years of practice, we finally get it right and get to Stage 3, where we are Consciously Competent. We are now executing correctly. However, it takes conscious effort to do so. Each time we lose focus, mistakes occur.

Finally, after a few more weeks, months or years, in Stage 4, we are so adept that we are effortlessly executing correctly without much pro-active thought. We are now Unconsciously Competent.

Think of how we drive a car. When we were kids, we couldn't drive, and we didn't know that we didn't have the requisite skills to do so. When we got old enough, we took lessons with a driving instructor and for the first time learnt how difficult it is to simultaneously manage a clutch and a stick shift, or for the younger readers, how difficult it is to parallel park. After a few more lessons, and hopefully before the test date, we finally got the hang of it – but only when we focused hard. Now, after years of driving, we hardly think of what we do when we drive to work.

The same four stages apply when we look at behavioural change.

My issue in trying to implement a new sleep, exercise and diet regiment all those years ago was that while I understood superficially the science of healthy living (the *What*), I was a complete novice – Unconsciously Incompetent – in two equally important aspects of behavioural change: the *Why* and the *How*. These were my two blind spots.

HEAD TO HEART TO HABIT

While change always begins with awareness – we can't change what we aren't aware of! – what is the best way to illuminate our blind spots? In the following chapters, we will develop a framework to address this.

BEING FAT WITH TWO BLIND SPOTS

Summary of Introduction and Chapter 1

- Only 10% of heart patients change their lifestyle post-treatment, despite easy access to good medical advice on what to do.
- A focus on *What* alone will not get us to our goals.
- Behavioural change, though difficult, is a skill we can learn.
- When we learn a skill, we proceed through four stages: from Unconsciously Incompetent to Consciously Incompetent to Consciously Competent and finally to Unconsciously Competent.
- When seeking to make behavioural change, we are often Unconsciously Incompetent with respect to the *Why* and the *How* – two critical blind spots.

How to make lasting change at work and in your personal goals

NINE IN TEN heart patients don't change their lifestyle post-treatment. In a matter literally relating to life and death, only a staggering 10% follow through on what to do to live more healthily.

And yet at work, managers are surprised when their teams don't adopt a new behaviour after a quick chat. Chances are that the same surprised manager who's been asked by their own manager to change a behaviour has also been struggling to do so.

Performance consultant Oliver Foo explains the gap that so often exists between our intentions and our actions, and provides a powerful framework to build new behavioural habits to get to our goals.

Along the way, he recounts stories of his own and his clients' struggles, and how "Head to Heart to Habit" enabled their eventual breakthrough.

"A practical and powerful way to translate vision into behaviours"

Kenneth Chan

Former President, McDonald's Greater China

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