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Context to the conversation

Katy speaks about the power of constraints and commitment devices which can help us move towards our goals. She refers to what Victor Hugo did when he was faced with a deadline in 1830 to publish his new book – The Hunchback of Notre Dame. When he had only 6 months left, Victor collected all of his clothes, removed them from his chambers, and locked them away. He was left with nothing to wear except a large shawl. Lacking any suitable clothing to go outdoors, Hugo was no longer tempted to leave the house and get distracted. Staying inside and writing was his only option. Katy speaks about the notion of commitment devices which borrows from this broad idea.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And moving along, I also love the story around Victor Hugo and how he locked up all his clothes and just kept a shawl to complete The Hunchback of Notre-Dame. And in a way, this flies in the face of economics where you would think people prefer more freedom, but your research suggests that people often prefer to handcuff themselves. And you spoke about this even in the way students sometimes, you know, different clusters, how they submit their assignments on time, and you refer to the notion of commitment devices. So can you talk a little bit about the nuance here around why we sometimes choose to handcuff ourselves while we should be preferring more freedom?

Katy Milkman (KM): Yeah, absolutely. I think this is a really interesting topic and I really enjoy teaching my Wharton students about commitment devices because it is very counterintuitive. We are all used to the idea that maybe a benevolent government might impose some rules on us to try to help us achieve more, that a parent might do the same. And recognizing that, for instance, we might be tempted to speed but there is going to be speed limits that will prevent us from doing that and fine us if we do, so we would not be tempted or as tempted to speed and will understand that there is consequences that might deter us from doing so. So we are really used to that kind of structure from someone else. But what is interesting is that research shows people, sometimes, will impose and benefit from structures like that on themselves, meaning self-imposed penalties for misbehavior. The idea that people would do this is counterintuitive, it is sort of counter to economic theory, like why would you ever fine yourself for bad behavior and yet, research shows people do find it appealing sometimes to constrain their future behavior in a way that will help ensure they follow through on their long-term goals. This can be particularly important when you know you have some long-term goal, but you might be tempted to deviate from sticking to that path. Like, you know what, you want to get these assignments done and do them well over the course of a semester but if you have no deadlines, they are all due at the end of the term, you may be tempted to procrastinate, put off all the work until the last minute, and then not get it done. So, one study by Klaus Wertenbroch of INSEAD and Dan Ariely of Duke University, they did this really nice experiment

showing that students, given the opportunity, they self-impose deadlines for assignments due throughout a class, they will be penalized, meaning if you turn it in late, you will get less credit. A lot of students actually choose equally spaced deadlines, not all, some say, yes, stack them all at the end, I want the most freedom and flexibility possible. But others choose to distribute them more evenly so that they would not procrastinate. And this ability to self-impose deadlines turns out to improve student performance, particularly on the last assignment of the semester when they might have all the work pile up. One of my favorite studies is also a study about cash commitments, which are different kind of commitments, so that is where you can penalize yourself for failures as opposed to setting up structures, like create rules and prevent failure. This study was looking at smoking and it gave smokers the opportunity and one experimental condition to put money on the line that they would forfeit if they failed to quit smoking in the next six months. Now, you might say like, why would anyone put money on the line that they could just otherwise pocket, no matter what but the answers of course to incentivize themselves not to keep smoking because they really do want to quit. So, people could put money in this account and then they know they had to forfeit all the money if they fail on nicotine cotinine test six months later. People who had the ability to do that quit at 30% higher rates than people who just got sort of a standard smoking cessation toolkit. And that is fascinating, it shows us, not everyone, by the way, put money in this account, lots of people did not, but enough did that it generated these benefits. So when we can think of ways that we can basically fine our future selves or constrain our future selves, sometimes that could be valuable if the barrier to goal achievement is that we might give into a temptation, the short run will be sorry, we gave into in the long run.

DJ: And is there a nuance here about private versus public commitments?

KM: It is certainly the case that there is more efficacy in commitments in terms of, you know, are you going to achieve your goals, the bigger the penalty imposed for failure. On the other hand, there is also more penalty incurred if you fail. So there is a little bit of a trade-off there but if the real goal is, I want to change this behavior, the more cost you impose on yourself for failure the better, and a public commitment, it is just an added cost because basically now you are adding shame to the equation. So you can pile money on, like, fine yourself more if you fail to quit smoking but then you can say like, you know, I am going to tell my grandmother and my aunt and the new person I am dating, all these people are going to find out if I fail and then that is extra cost in the form of shame. So public commitments are just one way to up the ante and make it costlier to fail.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: When I am working with a leader and I conduct their assessment, I suggest that they share the assessment report with a couple of close people around them, typically spouse and a friend. Somebody who can shed some light on some of the themes that come up but also somebody who can hold them accountable on some of the change effort.

I had the opportunity to speak with Marshall Goldsmith (MG), one of the most experienced and successful coaches out there and he spoke about the fact that he has somebody calling him every day asking him the same 6 questions to hold him accountable.

MG: *"I am going to give you a technique now that takes three minutes a day, it costs you nothing, it will help you get better on almost anything and will stick if you do it. Now, some people would think, three minutes a day, cost nothing, help me get better at almost anything, it sounds ridiculous too good to be true. Half the people start doing this quit in two weeks. We'll see how you do. Two weeks people quit. It's called a daily question process. Okay, get together a spread sheet, on one column*

write down a series of questions that represent anything in your life you want to get better at friends, family, health, and work, whatever. Now every question's answer yes, no or a number. You fill it out every day, at the end of the week you get a report card. Now, let me warn your listeners in advance that report card thing the week may not be as beautiful as corporate values like you see up on a wall. See in my glowing introduction you mentioned a lot of good things about me. One thing you left out, I have an incredible skill, you left out, that's the ability to screw something up almost every day, you can't screw something up almost every day. When you do this process every day you get to look at it. Now, I have someone call me on the phone every day to make sure I do this, every day. Somebody asked me why you have someone calling on the phone, don't you know the theory about how to change behaviour. I wrote that theory about how to change behaviour. That's why I have someone call me on the phone. My name is Marshall Goldsmith; I got ranked number one coach and leadership thinker in the world for years. I have someone call me on the phone every day just to listen to me read questions I wrote, provide answers I wrote every day, why? My name is Marshall Goldsmith, I am too cowardly and too undisciplined to do any of those stuff by myself, and I need help. And you know what, its okay, its okay. We all need help."

DJ: Back to Katy Milkman, I guess we all need some sort of commitment devices to ensure that we get the job done. For Marshall Goldsmith you can find him in the guest section of playtopotential.com

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Marshall Goldsmith that is referenced: [Getting behaviours and habits to stick](#).

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Katy Milkman - Nuggets

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About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock the human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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