

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - SAMUEL SALZER

(Katie Elliott & Samuel Salzer)

Samuel Salzer is a leading behavioural strategist and habit expert. At the forefront of the emerging field of behavioural design, Samuel is a frequent keynote speaker, curates the popular newsletter *Habit Weekly* and has co-authored the book, *Nudging in Practice: Helping Organisations Make it Easy to do the Right Thing*.

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Welcome Samuel.

Thank you Katie. Good to be with you.

Tell me where are you today?

Funnily enough, I'm actually in Mexico City at the moment - and don't picture me sitting next to a pool cos, honestly, I'm actually wearing a jacket cos it's actually quite cold at the moment. So there's no pools, there's no sipping fancy drinks. It's just me sipping tea with a jacket on.

Well I'm a bit bewildered because the last time we spoke you were in Stockholm. Tell me more about Mexico.

Sure. So currently I'm working as an independent behavioural strategist and so that allows me to work on interesting projects pretty much all around the world at the moment.

Ah, that sounds amazing. Samuel, I have just downloaded a new tool that you've created to help people form habits. You call it the Habit Canvas. Can you tell us a bit about what it is and why you invented it?

Sure. So it's a one-page tool. It's something that you can print out or you can fill it in digitally. And what it does is it guides you through 10 simple steps to help you create a personalised habit-building plan based on your unique goals and circumstances, backed by behavioural science. I started building it because I have been working with habits for quite a while now. Both initially, I started working directly with people, helping them build habits - but more so over the last couple of years helping build applications that can help people build habits. And one of the things that I've noticed and has been kind of a frustration for me, is seeing two things when it comes to helping people build habits. You'll usually find either like a habit tracker promoted as, "This is a way to build habits" or you'll find some articles saying like, "These are 10 hacks from behavioural science to help you build habits". And habit trackers, they definitely have their place. But probably the last thing you would think about when you're trying to build a habit is tracking it. And secondly, with articles, they are great and a lot of times they are actually based on real behavioural science, but they're really hard to implement. And so the challenge for most people is that it's easy to think about what we want to do in our lives - having intentions - but it's really hard to implement them into our messy lives. And so I wanted to create a

one-page tool to help people both plan, implement and build good habits kind of all in one. And so that's kind of what I've done here.

Well as somebody who's spent quite a lot of time reading about habits and trying to change my own, what I loved about it is the fact that it is completely evidence-based, isn't it? You've got a long list of references at the end so that people can find out more about the theory behind all of the things that you are encouraging people to try. So is it the distillation of many years of your experience and reading?

Yeah. And thanks for bringing up the research cos that's kind of where it started. I had this idea of, wouldn't it be nice to have this one-page canvas, but then I wanted to make sure that all of the things that we know from research have proven to give positive effects would be able to kind of make their place there.

You mentioned earlier that one of the main ways that people attempt habit change is by using a habit tracker - and there is a habit tracker as part of the canvas, isn't there?

Yes.

Can you tell us about some of the other ideas that you've incorporated into the canvas that people might try?

Sure, so the start is not talking about habits at all actually, the start of the canvas is looking at what's called 'aspirational goals'. And so the aspirational goal is there to help you identify what is the most important thing you want to focus on in your life. What is the thing you want to dedicate the coming year or the coming period of your life to really improve? And it really comes down to of what person do I want to become? So it's a little bit daunting to ask yourself that question, but it needs to be about you and it needs to be about what's important to you and not about what anyone else does. And so that's kind of the first thing to really help set compass and a direction for where you want to go. And so once you identify, let's say you want to become more knowledgeable, be a better parent, be a better partner, become better in shape - it can be a lot of these kinds of things. But as you notice, it's not so clear right now what you're going to do to get there, but it sets the general direction for where you want to go. So that's the first step. So then you're trying to understand, okay, this is where I want to go. How can I get there? And so you're going to try to identify the habits that can take you closer to achieving this aspirational goal. Sometimes that's very easy. Sometimes people have a clear habit in mind - I want to read more books, I want to start running - whatever it is. But sometimes it can be less clear. And so one of the things that I like to do personally, even when I have an idea of what habit I want to build, is to kind of put a brake on that and do what I call 'behaviour generation' or 'habit generation'. So it's about generating options for what habit you could build. And so when you think about it, a lot of times you have a lot of options. When it comes to becoming, let's say, more fit, you can probably list a hundred different habits you could build to make yourself more in shape, for example. And so you could run, you could walk, you could dance, you could do CrossFit. A lot of things you can do. And so the first step here is just listing all those things, like list as many as you want. And the next step is trying to understand, okay, how can I sort through this? And I use what's called the Four E's to, to rank here. How easy it is, how enjoyable, how exciting and how

effective. And so you kind of rank them from one to five on each category because we are biased towards what's exciting and enjoyable. And so those are really important obviously. But two things we usually forget is the ease and the effectiveness of this behaviour. And so if you have three things, let's say walking, swimming and doing CrossFit - CrossFit might sound super exciting and you might think like, well I should build a CrossFit habit. But then when you start thinking about it, you realise that, well it might not be very enjoyable cos it's quite hard and it might not be very easy. And so if you're trying to start getting in shape, this might be actually the worst option because you're going to get really sore the first time and you're not going to be very excited to go back into doing it again as well. So a better one could be swimming, if you enjoy swimming as well. Cos it's definitely gonna be more easy and you still might get some excitement from it as well. So just to kind of keep what's making your heart sing, but also what's maybe a smart strategy to approach here. And then to make this a goal, you just want to make it also easy. So a common thing that people do is they make it very hard. If they choose swimming, they want to swim five times a week. A good thing is to try to shrink this behaviour to as small a thing as possible, and something you could do even on your worst day is kind of my usual advice. And then you describe it as specifically as you can. So what are you going to do? When are you going to do it and where? And then you have your habit hopefully.

Yeah.

So that could be, let's say, swimming for 30 minutes on Mondays and Thursdays at 6:00 PM at the gym or it could be reading for 10 minutes every weekday morning on my commute to work. And so as you can hear, I try to really make it specific here so you really know, how long am I expected to do this? When am I focusing on getting this habit in place? And where is the place that I'm going to do it in? And so actually I would say having done this well, a lot of the work has been done. Like, doing this thoroughly and well really sets you up for success. And this is where we know from, for example, implementation intentions, specifying these kind of things very clearly has a tremendous effect compared to people that just say, okay I'm just going to start working out or I'm just going to start swimming but not making it very clear when and for how long and and where.

Is that because you're doing a lot of the work of decision making up front when you're highly motivated so that in the moment, you know at 6:00 PM on a Thursday when you may not feel terribly energised or motivated, you don't have to make the decision to take yourself swimming cos you've already made it?

Yeah, 100%. That's a general strategy for succeeding with building habits or changing behaviours, doing all of the kinds of the structural things when you have high motivation: making a plan, changing your environment, changing how your home looks, doing things that's going to make it easier for you to just do your habit when it comes down to it. So you're spot on.

So you've come up with a kind of big picture view of what it is you want to change. You've come up with a list of ways that you might be able to get yourself there and you've ranked them using the four E's. You've chosen what seems like the best idea and now you've got

really specific about the behaviour that you're going to do, when you're going to do it, where you're going to do it. So what next?

Right. Well there are a couple of steps more that can be really useful to take. And so one of them is actually questioning, why should I start with this habit now? Is this something that I really want to focus on right now? And this question is there to help you save some time and effort, if you feel like, well actually this is not something I really want to start right now, maybe in a few months time. But also it can really help to write down why now is a good time to start, because there's no perfect time to start, but thinking about why now is a good time can really help give you an initial boost to think maybe this is actually the best moment to get this going. And continuing on this is, helping you also fill in the biggest benefits of building this habit. What's been shown to be very effective is actually thinking about what will this habit bring me? And so I've chosen to include both today, in three months, and in one year. So here you're thinking about, let's say, what will going swimming do for me today? Well, it might not change my life, but it's probably going to make me a little more relaxed. Maybe I'm going to feel like I have accomplished something today. I'm going to feel like I've done something good for my body and my body is going to be feeling more at ease and I'm going to probably sleep better as well. So there's definitely some direct benefits. But then you think about, okay, what will this bring you three months? You might think, well actually I will probably be a little bit more fit, by then. I might not have a six pack but, but I'm going to be definitely better in shape and that's going to probably have some benefits in all areas of my life in terms of sleeping better in general, having better focus when I go to work. And then in one year's time you can really see yourself probably like, well, if I do this in one year, I can probably, if not achieve my aspirational goal, get really close to it. And so listing this down can kind of help you see that just doing this today will give great benefits. But if I really stick to this, this is what doing this will bring. So this is really to optimise and boost your motivation when you get started.

Just a question about 'why now?', Are there particular times when it's good to form new habits? I mean obviously we've just come past the New Year. I think we've already reached the part in the new year where most people's habits have now fallen by the wayside.

Uh, yes. I think 80% of people have given up.

So I know a lot of people use the New Year as a kind of trigger for new behaviour, whether or not that behaviour turns out to be successful - but are there particular days of the week, are there particular times of the year, when research suggests that we're more likely to be successful?

Yeah. Funnily enough, even though we make fun of people for not sticking to their New Year's resolutions, we know that there's this thing called the Fresh Start Effect. I think they actually did the study relating to New Year's resolutions. And so they realised that people who had a New Year's resolution, compared to the same kind of resolution at a later stage, were more likely to succeed than the control group. And so it can be good to start at the New Year. But I think the good news from these studies is that this is a pretty cool effect because it comes down to how we think and how our minds work. And funnily

enough, we're really good at making fresh starts for ourselves. We can create a fresh start from a birthday, we can create a fresh start from a new job, we can create a fresh start from even the first day of the week. And so probably my only advice in terms of when you put in your start date, think about maybe don't start on a Thursday, for example, cos it's going to be close to the weekend and it's probably going to be disrupted, for example. But maybe start on Monday, or maybe if you have an anniversary that's close in two week's time, or a birthday coming up. Maybe save the inception point for that date - cos it's probably going to give you just a little boost.

Fantastic. So we've done all of that and we've got really clear about what the benefits are likely to be - the short term and the longer term benefits. What do we do next?

So now we just want to make sure that we get this habit to stick. And so two things that can be really useful - two types of triggers or cues to get you started on your habit. Cos, by definition, a habit is an automatic behaviour. And if you haven't done this before it's not going to be automatic. And so you're probably going to forget it if you're not properly reminded. So what do you want to do early is to really think about, how can I set myself up so that I have some good call to action of doing this habit? And so one way is to have anchor habits - thinking about, okay I am not habit-less at the moment, I have plenty of habits as it is. And so, given the time and place I want to get this habit in place, what existing habit could I kind of piggyback my new habit on? So if it's reading in the morning, it could be, for example, after I brew my cup of tea or coffee, then I start reading 10 pages. It's looking at your existing routines and habits and picking out one that's perfect to kind of piggyback your habit on. And it could really help actually to like, this sounds a little stupid, but to visualise as you're doing it. So visualise for example, that you're brushing your teeth, and once you're brushing your teeth, you're doing your habit. And go through that a couple of times in your head. So that's a great way to do it. That's one of the favourites of, for example, BJ Fogg and many others. And then we have the traditional kind of trigger, cos we're just trying to look at something that can trigger us in our environment. And so here you can also add an alarm, you can put a post-it note up, you can write something on the fridge, you can have a phone notification, you can put it on your calendar. Anything that would remind you, should you forget even your anchor habit. It's great to have something that's going to always remind you anyway. So that's kind of a combination of those two. They're there to make sure that you never forget. And then, once you have that in place, what I think is the most fun part in many ways. Just thinking about, okay, I have been triggered to do my habit. I have done my habit, I succeeded. What next? Well, what I recommend is having some positive reinforcement. Just something you should do after completing your habit that makes you feel good about yourself. So it's thinking about, in what small way can I celebrate after having done my habit? It can be pretty much anything. So you could do a small celebration, you can play a certain song, you can transfer like one pound to a certain meaningful thing you want to save for. Think about what can make me feel a little bit good about myself? And this is not so much like buying myself a cookie. It could be that, but more so thinking about reinforcing this feeling of having accomplished something. A good example for myself is that when I started to build my gym going habit, way back, I will admit that I didn't find the gym to be the most fun place to be. And so I'm probably not alone here, but what I did was that after I finished my workouts, I played this song and it was somewhat of an

accident initially because I just liked that song. But then I started doing it every time I finished a workout and it really reinforced this feeling of, okay, it might not have been the best workout. I might not have done everything perfectly, but I was here, I did my workout and I'm done now. High five to me. So don't be afraid to do something, even if it's just a tap on the back, metaphorically or literally. It can make a big difference.

What I've noticed is that once the habit becomes more established, it becomes really uncomfortable not to do it because of that sense of something being incomplete. So it becomes less about the celebration or the reward and more about, you don't feel quite right unless you've done the habit, you feel like there's something missing.

Exactly and so that's what I will say with a couple of things on the canvas is that these are kind of boosters to really get you going and building your habits. And the good news is that you don't need them, like you say, once the habit is starting to become more automatic. All of a sudden you will not need all of these things. And then what's really interesting as well is how we shape our identity. We know that if things are in line with our identity we will usually feel more obliged to do them. Our identity shapes our behaviour in many, many ways and what we can see in terms of habits is that they have a very interesting kind of bond, in that when we give evidence to ourselves - for example, spend a lot of time in the gym - while we initially might not have seen ourselves as very kind of gym-typical people, after a while we can't help but feel like we are very fit people because we are in the gym on a regular basis and we are taking care of our body on a regular basis. And so we'll start to actually see ourselves as people that are not only doing that in the gym, but we will start eating healthier as well, because why would I eat this crap if I'm spending so hard a time in the gym, taking care of my body? So that's one of the things that I feel is most amazing to see, is people making these more identity shifts as well through their work with building habits.

So you're helping to make the difficult bit of the process - that first bit of the process where we need most clarity and motivation and skill - really you're helping to make that bit easy, knowing that once the habit starts to take hold, the whole process kind of rolls by itself, doesn't it? It's that first bit that it's so important to get right and that's why it's so valuable to have a tool that we can use to help us in that phase.

That's what I hope. And definitely I think what we can see is that there is no exact day that we can say that it takes X amount of days to build habits, but we know that it gets much easier as you get around I think 30 or 40 days. And so that's kind of why I designed the Habit Canvas in the way I did, to really give a good boost for the first month or so, because once you get over that threshold, it's starting to get easier. Then you won't need as much of these kind of Habit Canvases and trackers and so on. Cos it's more integrated into your identity and more how you live your life.

Fantastic. So is the only remaining part of the canvas the habit tracker?

Two small parts, apart from that as well. So one part, it is small part but it's a very important one and it's called the 'if then' plan. Building habits is not always a walk in the park, because life isn't a walk in the park. Life is messy. Or you think you have life figured out and then all of a sudden you get sick, you get fired. Like anything can happen in life.

So what's really useful is to think about, okay there will be obstacles that's going to make it harder for me to stick to my habits. Whatever I do, there's always going to be things that pop up. So what can I think about in advance to prepare for them? For example, a common one could be, if you want to read in the morning, maybe you will likely, at some point, sleep in. So if I sleep in, what can I do instead? And so just creating that plan is going to make it so much easier to stick to your habit in the longterm, cos then, okay, you're going to have this thing happen, you're going to sleep in, but then you're going to still stick to your plan of, let's say, reading at lunch instead. And so the habit still keeps going. Or, for example, you plan to work out after work, but surprise surprise, at times you're probably tired and drained and not wanting to spend time in the gym, but rather wanting to spend time on the couch, for example. And so then you could have, well if I feel tired after work, then I'll at least just do a walk around the neighborhood or I'll just do 10 minutes workout. Like you can make a smaller version of your habit. So at least you're kind of sticking to it. And so succeeding with those kinds of things is going to be building the most perseverance in the long term. Cos you showed yourself that, okay, I didn't have the perfect circumstance today, I was a little bit tired, I felt a little bit drained, but I still did something. So tap on the back for me for at least doing something. It doesn't matter if you had a goal of reading 10 pages, if you just read like one sentence, knowing that you've done something, it's going to benefit you in the long run.

In terms of your identity, even if you only read one sentence, you're still a reader.

Exactly.

So once again, you've made the decision upfront so that in the moment when you don't feel very well or you're tired or you've overslept or whatever's happened, you're not then trying to be creative and resourceful. You can just look at the plan and follow instructions.

Yeah, exactly, and that's one of things that I would probably recommend, as well, be open to expanding on - because it is definitely an iterative process. In some ways there are no per se failures here because, let's say you're trying to build a habit, then you realise after two weeks that it hasn't been going very well. Looking over the plan again and looking over the reasons why you skipped can really make an epic if-then plan, because you can add some more things to it that could make you even more bulletproof as you try the next time. Before I forget, the last two things here... So if you have someone that either you can do the habit together with or someone who you can report to, it can be a very useful thing to support you and help you stick to it, especially initially. The only thing I would recommend here is not choosing just any person, but someone you trust and rely and care about in some ways, because it makes it more effective. You don't want to let someone down that you want to kind of see you in a good light. But if you just have some random person, you don't really care about maybe what they think of you, for example.

So you're creating some kind of external accountability.

Yeah, and that again, I don't have that as a 'must' cos we're different. So some people don't really feel like having external accountability while others love having that. And so it's a little bit depending on who you are. But either way, what you will do as you finish the Canvas is you always sign the Canvas. And you would say like, I commit to this plan. (So

this is not anyone else, it's just committing to yourself.) I have created this plan. I have a clear understanding now what I want to do and why I want to do it and now I'm going to get it done.

Fantastic. Well that seems like an amazing overview of the Habit Canvas. I feel even more excited about it now than I did when I looked at it. So I'm going to have to go back and start creating some new habits, I think.

Cool.

I'm guessing that you can probably think of one relating to the Habit Canvas, but do you have a 'Little Challenge' for us? Something small that somebody at home could be trying?

Good question. What I would experiment with is creating some separation from you and your phone. So putting your phone away from where you sleep. And I'm not saying this cos I judge people who look at their phone when they wake up because, hey, I'm as guilty as anyone for doing those kinds of things. What I've noticed is that one of those things that can happen so often and so easily is that we have this plan for our morning routines or evening routines or whatever it is. But our phone is an excellent saboteur, and so just having a little bit of distance from it if possible, just putting it in, if you can in another room, but you don't need to, you can put it in a drawer somewhere else in where you sleep for example. But just having some distance helps you in the morning when you get up, just don't have that knee jerk reaction of just picking up your phone and scrolling. But thinking a little more about, what I want to do with this day? If you're really desperate to get to your phone, at least that will get you out of bed. So it would have done something good, right? So that's my 'Little Challenge'. That's something I personally have noticed had a big difference for me.

That's great. So Samuel, I'm going to share links to the various places that people can find you, to Habit Weekly, which is the fantastic newsletter that you send out, and also a link to the Habit Canvas so that people can have a go at completing that themselves. Is there anything else that you'd like to let people know about, where they can connect with you?

Uh, no, I think that's perfect. I think especially my newsletter, *Habit Weekly* - if you're interested in trying to understand how to change behaviour for good and how to build habits, that's a great place. And then lastly, I would just say, good luck. Whatever habits or behaviour changes you want to try to accomplish, and whether you use the Habit Canvas or not, I wish you the best. And I think it's something that we should see as somewhat of a personal exploration. And so one of the things that I've learned from being in this field for a long time is that putting yourself in these kinds of situations helps you learn a lot about yourself and what makes you tick. And that makes life interesting. So yeah.

It certainly does. That is wonderful, thank you. You've shared so much really valuable information with us today. Thank you so much Samuel.

My pleasure. Happy to be on.