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# CRUCIAL SKILLS

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## IN THIS ISSUE

- [Editor's Note](#)
- [Quote of the Week](#)
- [Featured Event](#)
- [Crucial Tip](#)  
*Three Sources of Influence*
- [Kerrying On](#)  
*Breaking Habits*
- [Where Can I Learn More?](#)
- [Contact Us](#)



## Kerrying On Breaking Habits

Since the dawn of humanity, philosophers, scientists, and puppeteers alike have been asking the same penetrating questions: Do we have free will? Do we actually make choices on our own, or is our behavior determined by powerful forces from our environment such as nagging parents, our outlook calendar, or the snarling pit bull next door?

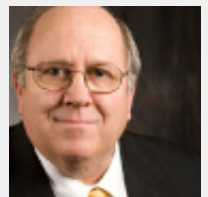
During my first year of college I came to the conclusion that by the time I was aware that much (if not all) of what I did was, indeed, a function of my upbringing and surroundings, it was too late for me to undo the effects. The die had been cast. My language, my actions, my very methods of reasoning—all had been shaped before I realized what was going on.

So, I came up with a plan. In order to regain control of my will, I would act in ways that were opposite to my proclivities. Surely, this would put me back in charge. Ah, but this thought too had been shaped by my life's experiences and was therefore hardly a choice, so I'd do the exact opposite. I'd follow my natural desires. Wait a minute, this couldn't be right . . . and thus I swirled down an infinite loop of circular thinking until I eventually stumbled on a philosophy of my liking: gluttonism. I'd think about other (more important) issues over a chocolate milkshake.

And so I plodded along unfettered by concerns over free will/determinism until one fateful day—the day my wife and I bought our first home. Along with the automatic dishwasher and two-car garage, our home came equipped with, of all things, a test of my free will. The test was cleverly disguised as a redwood deck, but it was a test nevertheless and I couldn't easily escape it.

Here's how the free-will test worked. The first time I walked out on the second-story deck to take in the view, I leaned over the railing, looked down on our new lawn, and spit. I was thirty-four years old and hadn't spit in more than fifteen years.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Kerry Patterson is coauthor of three bestselling books, *Influencer*, *Crucial Conversations*, and *Crucial Confrontations*.

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## editor's note

### All Washed Up

The average doctor or nurse washes their hands less than half as often as they should. But what about your children?

Hyrum Grenny's latest research project identifies the vital behaviors for successfully influencing children (and adults) to wash their hands.

[Visit](#) the Crucial Skills Blog to watch the video and comment.



quote of the week

"There are ways to bring cognition—and with it, the hope for change—into highly routine interactions if only you can remind yourself to do so."

-Kerry Patterson, coauthor of [Influencer](#)

featured event

Influencer Training Coming to Las Vegas—October 13-14

Join us for two-day Influencer Training to learn a step-by-step strategy for solving entrenched problems by changing behavior. For trainer certification options, contact Janet Gough at [jgough@vitalSMARTS.com](mailto:jgough@vitalSMARTS.com).

[Register today](#) to attend Influencer Training in Las Vegas, or [visit our site](#) to find a training course in a city near you.



crucial tip

Three Sources of Influence

When you're problem-solving—either one-on-one or with a team—think through all possible root causes.

Consider the following sources of influence and how they may be affecting people's motivation or ability to solve the problem.

**Personal**—Does the person have the knowledge and skills required to do the job?

**Social**—Are other people providing the necessary information, equipment, resources, and assistance?

**Structural**—Is the work setting stable and conducive to what needs to be done? Are policies and procedures

My wife certainly had never seen me spit. And my kids, well, the whole idea of their father propelling germ-laden loogies into space was beyond the pale.

Before the spit hit the ground my wife pronounced me a filthy beast, and my seven- and nine-year-old daughters squealed in disgust. Normally the three of them saw it as their job to ridicule me for burping aloud or drinking milk straight from the container. Now that we owned a deck, their job had expanded. Because from that moment on, every single time I leaned against the deck's rail, it pushed my spit button. It was creepy. I couldn't *not* spit. When it came to the deck, I was little more than a loogie-marionette, jerked into action at the mere sight of an open space below me.

As a child growing up in Puget Sound I had lived around docks where, like all of my childhood friends, I spit every time I looked over the edge. It's what boys did. Children, I'm told, often push their food off their high-chair tray, not solely as a means of rebellion, but as a method for learning depth perception. Perhaps my hard-wired act of spitting as I approached a railing was an extension of this mechanism.

In an effort to re-captain my spit reflex I tried personal pep talks. I'd approach my backyard deck and think, "Don't spit, don't spit! You can do it!" But then I'd get distracted ("Oh, a pretty butterfly!"), lean against the rail, and—patoohee—I might as well have been a cowpoke leaning over a spittoon.

"Dad spit three times," my daughters would tell my wife when she returned from the market.

I mention this problem of *reflexively* jumping into inappropriate actions not because I want to enter the free-will/determinism debate, but because it's highly relevant to something I do care a great deal about—improving one's interpersonal skills. Here's how the two topics relate. Much of our daily social interaction is tightly scripted. We engage in the same conversations so frequently that they become rote. In fact, if pressed, not only could we say what needs to be said without really thinking about it, we could act out both parts.

The good news is that these patterned responses free up our brains to muse about other things. The bad news is, once we start into a script, it's hard to change what we do and say. We follow the script much like a well-worn and familiar path—actually, more like a steel railway.

For example, one evening my wife asked me to request fry sauce (a local product) when I ordered our food at a hamburger joint. I entered the queue, waited my turn, and then the clerk started into the counter script.

"May I help you?"

"Why yes," I replied—and off we went. I didn't merely know what I was going to say, I knew what the clerk was going to say. He was going to ask me if I wanted fries and a drink and when I said yes, he was going to ask: "Large?"

Of course, once I switched into auto pilot, I flew through the interaction without much thought and, you guessed it, I didn't ask for fry sauce. I was never going to ask for the fry sauce because the interaction was programmed from the beginning. I started into the counter script, and once I did, I fogged over, coasted along, and

supportive? Is there anything in the environment or the way the job is structured that is creating barriers?



where can I learn more?

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stopped making decisions.

This particular issue becomes important to people who have decided to improve their ability to communicate with friends and coworkers. For instance, many individuals who attend our Crucial Conversations Training return to work feeling excited about the prospect of using their new skills. However, despite their enthusiasm, they often don't think to bring what they've learned into play when called upon to do so. When a conversation starts to heat up (at the very moment when they should be thinking: "Cool, this is a time to try out some stuff I learned!") they get sucked into an old script. Only *after* the conversation has ended do they realize they missed a good chance to behave differently. At the beginning of the conversation, just before they think to try out their new skills, the dominos of habit begin to fall and—clink, clink, clink—routine behaviors tumble down one after another until, once again, they've messed up the entire interaction.

But it doesn't have to be like this. There are ways to bring cognition—and with it, the hope for change—into highly routine interactions if only you can remind yourself to do so. For those of you who have found it hard to change your conversation style, here are a few hints for breaking the bonds of pre-programmed scripts.

**Put up a Sign.** This was the ultimate solution to my redwood deck challenge. I posted a sign (on the rail itself) that simply stated "Don't Spit." I would read it just before I hit my spit button and I eventually broke the habit. When it comes to learning interpersonal skills, trainees often post pictures of the model they're following right in their office. This visual cue reminds them of the new way of dealing with high-stakes issues at a time and place when they need the reminder.

**Set Aside a Time.** With certain behaviors or skill sets, it's best to set aside a block of time where you can practice what you've just learned. For instance, when it comes to holding a crucial conversation, devote an hour a week during which you seek out high-stakes discussions. Then, as opinions vary and emotions start to run strong, you'll be on guard to bring your newest and best skills into play—avoiding the pitfalls of rote scripts.

**Get Cues from a Friend.** When I become too forceful, pig-headed—and then maybe a tad punishing—my wife calls me on it. If my bad behavior is aimed at her, she says something to the effect of, "You're doing it again." She does this in a pleasant way; I stop, take a breath, and then try to get back on my best behavior. In public when she spots the same nasty habits (only I'm applying them to others) she gives me a look that serves the same function. You can contract with a colleague at work to do the same thing. In short, as you head down the highway of interpersonal disaster, trusted friends hold up a stop sign and you backtrack to the right route.

**Apologize and Start Over.** Sometimes we miss the cue that says we need to bring newer and better skills into play, but we don't miss the fact that we're now careening down a dangerous road because we've obviously made a wrong turn (i.e., followed our old scripts). When this happens, rather than keep on truckin' because you're already well underway, stop, apologize, and start over. With this practice in your arsenal, you don't have to be perfect, just willing to try again.

Well, it's time for me to head to lunch with a friend. He wants to go to this Thai restaurant up the street, but I'm a bit apprehensive. It's not the spicy food that has

Questions, feedback, or information you would like to see in the newsletter? E-mail us at [editor@vital-smarts.com](mailto:editor@vital-smarts.com).

[Submit your Q&A question online](#) to the authors of *Crucial Conversations*, *Crucial Confrontations*, and *Influencer*.

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me worried. It's the building. You see, the place has this deck . . . with a railing.

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