

Announcer:

Welcome to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership podcast, a podcast all about leadership, change and personal growth. The goal? To help you lead like never before, in your church or in your business. And now, your host, Carey Nieuwhof.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, hey everybody, and welcome to episode 447 of the podcast. It's Carey Nieuwhof, and I hope our time together today helps you thrive in life and leadership. I've got Charles Duhigg. A lot of you know him from The Power of Habit, which was released almost a decade ago. Well, we're going to talk productivity because we are celebrating the launch of my brand new book At Your Best all this month. This episode is brought to you by my new book. If you haven't checked it out yet, I would love for you to do that. You can find it at, atyourbesttoday.com. What's it designed to do? Well, it's designed to help you get time, energy, and priorities working in your favor. I've been so encouraged by the early response to the book. It's been out for two weeks, and man, the reviews pouring in, the feedback I'm getting, it's been so much fun.

Carey Nieuwhof:

The other part that's been a lot of fun, if you haven't checked it out yet, The Art of Charm interviewed me for their podcast and it was so fun to hear AJ and Johnny who got an advance copy, talk about how they are reworking their life around the green, yellow, and red zones. Bottom line of the book is, you have three assets that you have to manage every day, time, energy, and priorities. Time can disappear really, really quickly if you're not careful. Energy levels, a lot of people don't think about other than, by the end of the day you're pretty tired. And then priorities, basically all day long, everybody else tries to hijack your priorities. If you can get those things right, and I've got a strategy that will help you do it, then bottom line is, you're going to get a lot better at managing your life and you will stay out of burnout.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I thought originally I was going to write a get out of burnout book. It turned out to be a stay out of burnout book. And yeah, you don't have to burn out. If you're burned out, this will help you get out as well. I developed a strategy after I burned out in 2006 and thought it was just something that helped me be more productive. And then as I started sharing it with other leaders, realized, "Oh these principles actually work." Worked for two or three years refining, doing more research, testing ideas, and then getting into the language that would really, really help people. And now it's out in the world and thousands of leaders are already using the framework. What do you see? Well, you see a lot more productivity at work and you also see a lot more freedom at home where you're not bringing work home with you every day.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It was funny, I did a live event with Jon Acuff this month and he asked me, "What were all the working titles?" The one that I forgot, we were going to call it all kinds of things, was The Three Hour Workday. I want to tell you about that. First of all, totally not fair to Tim Ferriss because it's complete rip off of his idea. But I do have a theory that basically you have three to five productive hours in a day. That's it. That's your green zone, when you are at your best. What I've done, the secret of the book, which I'll give to you right now, is if you can guard those three to five most productive hours for you in a day and get

your most important things done, your life changes. Now there's a lot more to that, but that is the linchpin. That is the idea that changes everything.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And so I thought, "Well, why don't we just call it the three hour workday?" Which is a lot of fun. But if I get my most important stuff, which in my case is usually content, for some of you it might be strategy, it might be reports, it might be fixing a problem that showed up the day before. I don't know what it was, or something that you haven't been able to solve. Often it's best used working on your organization, not in your organization, but whatever that happens to be, if you can get those big things done, when you are at your best, when your energy is flowing, when your mind is sharp, when things are clear and you can stave off everybody else who wants to hijack that time window, that's when maybe for me, because I'm a morning person by 11:00 AM if I've got that done, I feel I could go home.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Now, I'll still have meetings. You're going to work an eight hour workday probably, but it's in three hours you got everything done that you need to get done. And if you can stay focused in that window, well, that's incredible. If you've been wondering what the book's about, I wanted to take some time today to explain it. And then the other big surprise was, it is time, energy and priorities. I had developed some material before writing the book on priorities. What shocked me is, that's the biggest section of the book, because all you have at the first half of the book is a really good theory that works in perfect conditions, until life shows up. And so I've got strategies on how you can deal with problem people who keep hijacking your agenda, with the constant interruptions that show up in everyday life, and then how to keep yourself from distracting yourself.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Because a lot of us as Cal Newport has said on this podcast, we're not very good at deep work. We distract ourselves. Anyway, all that is in the book and more. Adam Grant, Seth Godin, Patrick Lencioni, and many others have endorsed it. I would love to get a copy into your hands. You can get it anywhere books are sold. If you've enjoyed it, leave a rating and review. In the meantime, you can also find all things At Your Best, at atyourbesttoday.com. Well, super excited to have Charles Duhigg with us today. He is a Pulitzer prize winning, New York Times bestselling author. He's an investigative journalist and author of The Power of Habit and Smarter Faster Better. We talk about both of those books and some of his ideas on productivity. Well, let's dive into my conversation with Charles Duhigg.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Charles. Welcome to the podcast. It's just great to finally meet you.

Charles Duhigg:

Yeah, you too.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, we got introduced to your work almost a decade ago now. Isn't it? Was that 2012 when The Power of Habit came out?

Charles Duhigg:

Yeah. Next year, 2022, will be the 10 year anniversary since we released The Power of Habit, which is a lot of fun that it's been 10 years.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Such a Seminole book. And of course you're a reporter by training and do a lot of work where you are with the New York Times and New Yorker magazine and so on. But what got you interested in the whole study of habit and productivity? A lot of the time it comes out of personal pain points. I'm just wondering what got you curious.

Charles Duhigg:

Yeah. Definitely that was part of it. There is these two experiences that I had. The first is that, I became a journalist after getting an MBA at Harvard and I went to Yale undergraduate and I was doing pretty well as a journalist. I felt like I had built a company. I felt there was all this stuff that I was pretty good at. And yet, it's one of those situations, "If you're so smart, why aren't you king of the world?" I was like, "If I'm so smart, why is it so hard for me to lose weight?" Right?

Carey Nieuwhof:

That is a really good question actually.

Charles Duhigg:

Why is it so hard for me to make myself go exercise in the morning? We have two kids and we had just had our first child. He was at that stage where he was eating those little chicken nuggets that they make for babies, which fall apart in your mouth. Literally I would be sitting at the dinner table, feeding my son and was not hungry. Knew that the chicken nuggets were not for me. They were for him, they were not healthy for me. I would just reach over and grab one and put it in my mouth, as if I couldn't even control it. I was like, "Why am I doing this? I don't even enjoy these chicken nuggets. They're not that good." And yet there seemed to be all these things that I just didn't have control over. That actually reminded me of an experience I had had when I was a reporter, I was in Iraq during the war.

Charles Duhigg:

I went down to the city named Kufa where there was this army major and I was interviewing him. He had been brought into Kufa, which is about an hour south of Baghdad, to stop riots from happening. He had figured out that he could stop the riots from occurring by removing the food vendors from the plazas. Because if there were no food vendors in the Plaza, guys selling kebabs and other food, people would get hungry and they would go home to eat. And the crowds never got large enough to become a riot. And so I asked this guy, "How did you know that removing the food vendors was going to stop the riots?" He was like, "I really didn't, I've tried a bunch of different things." But he told me this great story, which is that, many years before when he was in high school, he was about to graduate and he was trying to figure out what to do with his life.

Charles Duhigg:

He had two options. He was either going to go into the military or he was going to join his brother who'd become a very, very successful methamphetamine entrepreneur recently. And so he's like, "I'm going to join my brother." And then his brother gets arrested the night before his graduation. And so this guy decides to join the military. He says, "When you joined the military, the first thing that happens is, that

they basically start teaching you new habits. They teach you how to think about habits." This is true, a lot of what we know about the science of habit formation actually comes from militaries. Your instinct when someone's shooting at you is to run away, but they need to teach you this habit to shoot back. Nowadays when you're in a war zone, you can email your wife or your husband every night. And so they need to teach you good communication habits, because otherwise you're going to get into a fight and you're going to get distracted on patrol.

Charles Duhigg:

And so he said, when he joined the military and they explained how habits work, it was like someone had given him these x-ray glasses, suddenly he understood everything about himself. He understood everything about how the world works. And so when I was having this struggle with my son and not being able to exercise, I was like, "Man, I got to figure out what's happening inside my brain around habits." That was the Genesis of *The Power of Habits*.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Would you say a decade later, what are some of the enduring legacies of that research project and book? What would you say, "Okay, this changed my life?"

Charles Duhigg:

Well, I think the number one thing, and I probably get, I don't know, 10 to 20 emails a week, I would say, still a decade later, from people who say, "I drank too much and I tried to quit for years and I didn't know what to do. And then I found your book and this idea mattered, and it helped me stop drinking," or stop eating, or stop looking at porn, which I think is a problem I hear about a lot. I think the biggest idea and the most important one is this idea of what a habit actually is, how a habit exists within our neurology. Because we tend to think of a habit as one thing, right, as this behavior. But that's not right. What we know from science, is that every habit has three components. There's a cue, which is a trigger for an automatic behavior to start. And then the routine, which is the behavior itself, what we normally think of as the habit. And then there's a reward. Every habit has a reward.

Charles Duhigg:

It's because of that cue and that reward that your brain in particular, a part of your brain known as the basal ganglia that exists to make habits. It takes that cue and that reward and it combines it with the behavior to make it automatic, so that you basically actually stop thinking in the middle of a habit. That's why it feels almost unconscious. There was a researcher named Wendy Wood who followed around a number of people for a long time, trying to figure out how many of their daily actions were decisions and how many were habits. What she found, is that about 40 to 45% of what we do every day is a habit. And so nearly half of what you do every day is this thing that almost happens outside of your consciousness. It happens when you go on autopilot. The way to change that is not to just focus on the behavior, it's to try and understand those cues and those rewards.

Charles Duhigg:

And once you do, you can take advantage of that to change how you automatically behave. That idea, I think has been revolutionary, because I think it means for so many people who are struggling with, "Why can't I start exercising? Why do I drink so much? Why is the computer so tempting when I know I should be focused on work or focused on my kids?" Once you know where to start, how to diagnose that habit, it's much easier to start to change.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Some are bad habits, right? There's a certain queue with that. Let's go back to your chicken finger example with your son when he was younger, what would the cue have been in that situation?

Charles Duhigg:

I think in that case, literally it was just seeing the chicken nuggets. What we know from research, is that almost all cues fit into one of five categories. It's usually a time of day, a particular place, the presence of certain other people, a certain emotion or a proceeding behavior that has become ritualized. For me, I think that that habit around the chicken nuggets, it's because I was sitting at the dinner table with my son. Right? I can actually, I can envision him. I can envision my son in the high chair, wearing his onesie. I can see the plastic plate. If we were feeding him in the park, if we were feeding him outside of the house, I didn't have that same urge. For me, the cue was very, very physically dependent. It was based on a particular place and feeding my son. Maybe a little bit of a ritualized behavior. But other things for instance, people who you have a craving for a coffee when you're walking to work, that could be a time of day, or that could be the fact that you just have gotten into a ritual of having coffee when you sit down at your desk and you're anticipating that.

Charles Duhigg:

There's a lot of mental habits that are tied to emotions. When you feel a burst of anger or when you feel a burst of annoyance, you have a mental habit that often becomes a behavioral habits of perhaps getting annoyed at whoever is around you or getting sharp with someone or starting to ruminate on negative things. The key is, first of all, just figuring out, what is that cue? It's not hard to do. If you have a regular habit, whenever you feel the impulse for that habit, just write down those five things. What time is it? Who's around me? What am I feeling emotionally? Where am I physically? And then, what did I just do? Is there a preceding behavior that's become ritualized?

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's interesting, because I think about your example you use in the book quite a bit, which is, at a certain time of day, I want a chocolate chip cookie, and I'm going through that list, et cetera. I was talking to a leader who's very successful. We were talking about, with my new book, At Your Best, green, yellow, red zones. Red zone is when your energy is low in the day, green zone is when it's at its peak. And she's like, "Yeah, for me, it's two o'clock in the afternoon." And her husband said, "Yeah, and then it's sugar cookies. Right?" She goes, "Yeah. I said sugar cookies." Right? Because I feel that. I know for me, and I just want to test the theory out because lots of millions of people have read your book I'm sure. But not everybody listening to this podcast has read your book. But for me, I find, and my wife has helped me see this. You say emotions can be a trigger.

Carey Nieuwhof:

If I'm upset, I will almost always subconsciously make my way to the kitchen, and before I know it, I'm in the pantry or the fridge, looking for something relatively unhealthy to eat. I am not searching for spinach at that point. I'm going for cookie. I'm going for ice cream. I'm going for something like that. That can be a bad habit. It's just I'm feeling upset about something and therefore I'm going to eat it.

Charles Duhigg:

And so the next interesting question is, so for that habit, right? Your cue is an emotion, it's feeling upset. We know that the routine is that you go and you look for something to eat. Let's figure out what the reward is. What are you finding to eat? Is it really anything that's sugary? Is it anything that's carbohydrate-y? Is it anything that's just familiar? The last time this happened, what did you eat?

Carey Nieuwhof:

It would tend to be on the less healthy side. It would probably be chips, depending on what's in the cupboard. We try to keep that stuff to a minimum, chips, ice cream or a cookie. One of three.

Charles Duhigg:

Okay. Those are high carbohydrate items, right? My guess is, and what we know about carbohydrates is that basically it floods your system with glucose, right? You tend to change it into glucose really, they're comfort foods. The reason we call them comfort foods is that they make us feel a sense of satiation. The thing is to figure out what the reward it's delivering, you would have to do a little bit of experiments. Because I can think of a couple of different rewards that those cookies or those chips might be delivering to you. Right? One of them might be that literally just the carbohydrates and the production of glucose, you just feel satisfied. When you're upset, you don't feel satisfied. It could also be that when you're upset, you feel tense, right? Which is different from feeling unsatisfied, and that eating something resolves that tension a little bit, that you've learned to associate basically tension and relief from tension with a feeling of fullness.

Charles Duhigg:

Because the other thing that carbohydrates do, is they make us feel full in addition, which is distinct from making us feel satisfied. It could also be that you just need a distraction. You have learned that when you feel upset, you just need something to distract yourself, and walking to the pantry, physically removes you from whatever is upsetting you. It gives you a little bit of space. Now these are three different rewards, right? One is satisfaction. One is a release from tension. One is just a timeout, a moment away from whatever's upsetting you. The question is, which of those three rewards or potential other rewards is motivating this habit, is driving this habit? The only way to figure that out is just to run experiments.

Charles Duhigg:

The next time you get upset and you find yourself walking into the pantry, instead of grabbing chips, try to grab-

Carey Nieuwhof:

An apple.

Charles Duhigg:

An apple, yeah. An apple does that. See, does that work? Do you lose the craving for chips? The next time we want to figure it out around tension. The next time, get up, walk into the kitchen, instead of going to the pantry, just sit down and do 30 seconds of breathing exercises to reduce the tension that you feel in your body. Does that get rid of the chip craving? Then the third time you feel upset, you want those chips, go take a walk around the block, see if that gets rid of the craving. Because what you're doing is you're looking for some alternative behavior that's related to that old cue, right? It's still

triggered by the same old cue. It's delivering something similar to the reward that you're craving. And you just need to figure out what that reward is. And then once you know, you take a walk around the block instead of going into the pantry and you say, "Oh man, I don't have any craving for the pantry anymore. I don't want to eat chips."

Charles Duhigg:

Then you're like, "Now I know how to change this habit. Right? I know a new behavior to stick into that habit loop, the cue, routine, reward. I'm going to chew horn this new behavior, this new routine in, and now I know what to do when I feel that same urge."

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's so helpful. You also, I think at least in my mind popularized the idea of keystone habits. I think almost everybody listening to this would have heard about keystone habits. It was interesting because I was thinking about your work on that a couple of years ago, we were in Italy. We were in Rome. We were at the gates of the city that go back to, not prehistoric times, but 2,000, 3,000 years. Right at the top was a keystone. It was explaining to us that, "If that thing gets removed it all falls down." What is a keystone habit?

Charles Duhigg:

A keystone habit is, what we know from research is that some habits tend to matter more than others, right? When some habits start to change, it sets off a chain reaction that changes other habits as well. A great example of this is exercise. For many people, exercise becomes a keystone habit in their life. On the days that they exercise, they'll almost without thinking about it, they'll eat healthier that day. For many of us, this is intuitive, right? We've experienced that. We for some reason, we go running in the morning and then we walk into the cafeteria and it's easier to get the healthy salad instead of the unhealthy sandwich, because our legs are sore. It doesn't make any sense now that I say it, but we intuitively know it's true.

Charles Duhigg:

What's interesting is that there's all these other changes that often happen when people start exercising habitually. Your meal habits change, right? Your eating habits change. But also, and this comes from these researchers named Oaten and Chang who are in Australia. On the days that people habitually exercise, they tend to use their credit cards less. They tend to procrastinate less at work. Now we're less aware of that, right? We don't notice or pick up on it that we're spending less money or procrastinating less at work. And yet we know that this is true. There's something for many people about exercise that becomes a keystone habit. When that habit changes or emerges, it changes other habits almost automatically. There's this knock on effect.

Charles Duhigg:

Now what's interesting though, is that keystone habits, there's no such thing as a universal keystone habit. Everybody has different keystone habits. So not everyone they see changes in their life when they start exercising habitually. The people for whom it's not a keystone habit are people who usually were high school athletes. The reason why is interesting, is because the way that a keystone habit works, is it tends to change our opinion of ourself almost subconsciously. Right? One of the things we know about human psychology is that people, there's who you think you are. And then there's a part of your brain that's always observing you objectively and deciding who you are based on what you do rather than

what you say. This is known as revealed preferences versus stated preferences, in the psychology literature.

Charles Duhigg:

And so what happens is, if you were a high school athlete, if you're someone who thinks of yourself as a runner, as someone who's in shape, and you maybe take a couple of years off, you had a baby, new job, and then you start running again. It doesn't tend to change your self image, right? It just conforms to your self image. It's not a keystone habit for you. It doesn't change other habits as well. But if you're someone like me, who was not an athlete in high school, right? Who didn't do anything in high school, and then you start running. I'm actually running a half marathon this weekend. You start exercising. There's a part of your brain that starts saying, You know what? I'm the person who exercises, and the person who exercises, they don't eat crap for lunch. And also when they go into the store, they don't buy candy and stuff they don't need. They don't pull out there their credit cards, willy nilly, they don't procrastinate work."

Charles Duhigg:

And so that's why for some people exercise becomes a keystone habit, is because it changes how they see themselves. It changes their perception of themselves. That sets off this cascade of other behavioral changes in their life.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What are some other examples of keystone habits? One that comes to mind is getting up at a certain hour every day. Most of the leaders I talk to are morning people. And that seems to be a habit that has a positive effect on the rest of their life.

Charles Duhigg:

For them, and I'm sure it does, right? I'm sure that they think of themselves as, "I'm a disciplined person," and they're proving their discipline to themselves first thing in the morning, right? They're shaping their self image first thing in the morning, by getting up. But that's the thing, is that a keystone habit is different for every person, because it's the habit that changes how you see yourself. Let me ask you, if I asked you, "What are the keystone habits in your life?" What would you say?

Carey Nieuwhof:

We've hit on a couple already. One would be exercise. I was a non exerciser. I was a relatively serious asthmatic until I was in my mid 30s. And then we found out when we switched to hardwood over carpet, just for decor reasons, my asthma went away and suddenly I could exercise again. Now I cycle, I'll cycle a couple thousand kilometers every year. I've started running in the winter. That would be a keystone habit. I would say, getting up early and having that first hour in a particular order or sequence really sets my day up. I would say another one that I'm fairly new at embarrassingly being a guy in the church space, but Sabbath, I sucked at Sabbath for years and years and years, but the habit of taking a day off and enjoying time off. I don't know they're a Keystone habit. Could having a hobby be a habit?

Charles Duhigg:

Yeah, absolutely. What's interesting is if we spent more time, there is, I'm guessing some aspect of how you define yourself, inherent in each of those, right? You get up early, you're a disciplined person. You

observe the Sabbath because you are a man of devotion, right? You exercise because you're someone who cares about yourself. If I looked at your life, we'd find 10 other habits that don't really matter to you. Right? That there's no element of self-definitional. You probably brushed your teeth every single morning.

Carey Nieuwhof:

"I'm somebody who brushes my teeth. Look at me!"

Charles Duhigg:

Right. You don't think of brushing your teeth as proving something to yourself about who you are. That's not a keystone.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I drive a clean car. That's just something I've had since I drove a car worth almost no money, so I wanted it to be clean.

Charles Duhigg:

That's interesting. Right? There's probably some aspect, you don't have to drive a clean car. If your car was a little bit dirty, it wouldn't matter. You wouldn't be any worse of a person, but there's something about that that's probably self-definitional for you and you're proving to yourself that it's true by doing it. And so that's part of the keystone habit. There's lots of people who make their bed in the morning. Right. It's really important-

Carey Nieuwhof:

Yup. We do that too.

Charles Duhigg:

So for many people making their bed in the morning is a keystone habit. Here's the truth of matter, you don't have to make your bed in the morning. It doesn't matter. When you lie down at night, it does not matter if the sheets are tight or not. You're going to get it messy in about 10 seconds. But it's a way for people to prove to themselves to say something about themselves to themselves, like, "I'm an orderly person. I take care of my things." It becomes a keystone habit because it has the capacity to influence and shape how we see ourselves.

Carey Nieuwhof:

If someone was saying to you, and I'm sure you've had this conversation a thousand times over the last decade, Charles, but somebody says to you, "You know what? I need to get more organized. I need to be more productive. I'm not. Where would I start? How would I even find what keystone habit might be able to help me get better control of my life?"

Charles Duhigg:

Well, I think the first things are to look for the kinds of change that seem irrationally scary to you, right? And exercise is a great one. For people who have not exercised before, before they start exercising, they seem anxious about it, irrationally, right? I've felt this, you've probably felt this.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I did.

Charles Duhigg:

You wake up and you're like, "I don't know what to wear. I don't know what route to take. I'm going to look like an idiot. What if I hurt myself?" It's like, if you jog for two blocks, definitely those are not hard questions. You can definitely figure this out. Right? Nobody ever failed at exercise because they didn't have the right shoes on the first day. But the fact that it seems irrationally scary that you know that it seems irrationally scary, that indicates that was really making you anxious is not the activity itself, it's the self definitional capacity of it. That is a clue that if you start changing that behavior, that will become a keystone habit. Because what you're talking about there is you're talking about not the anxiety of the activity, but the anxiety of, "Am I the kind of person who can be a runner?"

Charles Duhigg:

And then once you start running and you prove to yourself that you can, suddenly it's like you've changed the definition of yourself inside your own head. That's why the other new habits flow out from that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's a really good point. It's what Seth Godin says, 'People like us do things like this.' Right? If you don't think of yourself as a runner and that gets into your diet, I might pick the apple over the chocolate bar.

Charles Duhigg:

Absolutely.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I might decide I'm not going to eat after 8:00 PM. I might buy a good pair of running shoes because now I know how to run.

Charles Duhigg:

I'm the person who runs half marathons, right? I'm going to run a half marathon this weekend in San Francisco. Am I in great shape? No. Am I going to run a fast? Not in the slightest. But you know what, there's a part of my brain that says, "Regardless of how much I want to BS myself and everyone else, actually the proof is in the pudding. I'm running a half marathon." I went and I ran three miles today and I ran 10 miles on Sunday. At some point your brain starts believing, "I'm actually this person, because I proved to myself that I am."

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's so good. You have another book that came out about five years ago, Smarter Better Faster.

Charles Duhigg:

Actually Smarter Faster Better. I get that a lot too.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Smarter Faster Better. Thank you. I read that wrong.

Charles Duhigg:

That's okay.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It starts with the story as well. Do you want to take us into what got you, because this is a study of productivity. I want to spend the rest of our time together on that.

Charles Duhigg:

Sure. Which story are you thinking of?

Carey Nieuwhof:

It was the one about this journalist that you were going to meet, who said he couldn't meet you and then you found why.

Charles Duhigg:

Right. Yeah, this is Atul Gawande, who, if anyone reads the New Yorker, you're probably familiar with him. Atul's actually become a friend. He's a wonderful person. And so the thing about Atul, he's a physician, he's a surgeon. He teaches at Harvard. He writes for the New Yorker magazine. He's won the MacArthur genius grant. He started a company that basically creates healthcare packs for people in the third world. He was on president Biden's Coronavirus task force. You look at this guy and it's like, "Where does he get the time for this stuff, man? I don't understand." I reached out to him and I was like, "Look, this is right when The Power of Habit had come out. I felt totally overwhelmed. I was writing the series for the New York Times that went on to win the Pulitzer. I felt totally overwhelmed."

Charles Duhigg:

I reached out to Atul and I was like, "Can I ask your advice on this? On how to manage my time?" Atul was like, "Look, I'd love to, but I'm really busy. I don't have the time to talk right now." And I was like, "Ah, that totally makes sense to me," with all the stuff he has going on. We have a friend in common, this guy named David Siegel. I was talking to David Siegel and I was telling him that I had reached out to Atul, but he didn't have time. I figured it must be because he's so busy with everything. David was like, "No, no, no. He actually, he's going to this concert with his wife. He was going to this concert with his wife and then I think he's doing something with his kids, he's playing tennis with his kids or something like that. That's why he didn't have time to talk to you."

Charles Duhigg:

I was like, "What?" I didn't feel offended. I was like, "How does this guy get so much done and have time?" And so I started looking at Atul. I basically started looking at the literature on, "Why are some people productive, more productive than other people?" The fundamental lesson there, which all we all know, is everyone has 24 hours in a day, right? The people who get more done, it is not because they are working harder. It's not because they're jamming more into their day. It's because they're making better choices about what they're doing, how they're spending their time. This was the core insight that

Smarter Faster Better was really built around, which is, throughout history, the killer productivity app has always been thinking more deeply, right?

Charles Duhigg:

Finding the time and finding these mental habits, what researchers refer to as cognitive routines, that force you to think more deeply about the choices you're making. Because most of us want to go on autopilot, right? We want to come up with a to-do list and then we wake up and we just do what's at the top of the to-do list. We find that the easiest thing to do so we can cross it off. But the problem is that there's nothing more wasteful than optimizing what never should have been done in the first place. Right? Replying to emails is almost always a waste of time, even if it makes you feel good, even if it makes you feel you've gotten something done, all that's going to happen is that you're going to get more emails.

Charles Duhigg:

And so the question becomes, how can we basically trick ourselves into thinking more deeply about the choices we're making? Particularly when thinking is hard, particularly when we're feeling stressed or pressured, or we don't have much time or we're tired or there's a bunch of important competing demands. How do we stop and think more deeply about what we ought to be doing rather than just what's at the top of the to-do list?

Carey Nieuwhof:

There's so much gold in that. I love the idea that the killer app in human history has always been thinking deeper. You're right. That's true. Cal Newport says it's increasingly scarce and therefore more valuable, the ability to really think through things. I think about all the content creators listening to this, whether it's preachers who are preparing next year's strategy or the next series, or whether it's CEOs who are trying to plot out strategy for the next year, the next quarter in an uncertain world, it's thinking more deeply that will do that.

Charles Duhigg:

Absolutely.

Carey Nieuwhof:

What did you learn about productivity working on the book?

Charles Duhigg:

I think one of the big things is, when you think more deeply, it should feel like work, right? Preacher is a great example. Some friends I saw this summer who are both Presbyterian preachers in Atlanta. I think one of the things that they confront is, when they're writing a sermon, it's not somebody appears and they're like, "Ding, you've spent enough time on the sermon. Right? You have enough original thoughts in there that it's going to work on Sunday." You've probably experienced this yourself. And so the question for them, and on the other hand, you can also go into autopilot and you might get away with it, right? You show up and you give the same sermon that you gave a year ago about the same part of the Bible. Maybe some of the people in the audience are going to notice, but maybe some of them aren't, or maybe you just go on YouTube and you look for the greatest hits ideas.

Charles Duhigg:

That's the thing, is that there is this constant opportunity for mediocrity in life. The mediocrity is good enough. It's good enough that you're not going to get fired. It's good enough that nobody's going to call you out on it. But of course, nobody wants to be just good enough. We want to do important things and meaningful things. Okay. What are the habits that we build that push us to think deeply and to understand how we ought to be spending our time? The first is, when you are doing this deep thinking, it should feel like work instead of feel like relaxation. There's a bunch of people out there who are like, "Look, what you really should do, is you should take a walk everyday around the park, right?"

Charles Duhigg:

Taking a walk everyday around the park is great. I would not say that you shouldn't do that, but that's not thinking deeply, right? Thinking deeply is sitting down and writing in a journal. Here's the problem I'm trying to solve. And then you write and you write and you write and your hand gets cramped. And then you look at it and you're like, "God, this is the worst writing ever. I'm no closer to the solution." And then you call in your assistant or you call in your spouse, and you start telling them about this thing you're trying to figure out, and they're bored out of their mind. They don't want to hear all about your problem. I do this every day with my wife. I tell her all about my day. My wife is like, "I don't care about your day. This isn't interesting."

Charles Duhigg:

But I'm not telling her about my day for her benefit, I'm telling her about my day for my benefit. The fact that it's boring and that it's hard to talk about, that's actually a good sign. That means that I'm doing work. And if you do that long enough, eventually you figure something out, you have some insights, some realization. That's the number one thing, is that it should feel like work. The second thing is, you need to find ways to allow it into your life and have the time and the space for it, and then reward yourself for doing it. Because the truth of the matter is, like all habits you're not going to do it unless there's some reward. When you do sit down and you write in your journal, or you write a letter to a friend, and it's this long rambling letter, or you bore your spouse to death by telling them about your day and this problem you have, you need to reward yourself and them for listening, but reward yourself for doing that, so it becomes habitual.

Charles Duhigg:

But that also means you need 45 minutes in your day where it's not scheduled and you have the time to do the thinking. Because otherwise what's going to happen is you're going to look at that gap in your day and you're going to say, "I could respond to five emails. I could check this thing off my to-do list." And then when you've done all of that, when you've come to some realization, "Actually the problem that I'm confronting is X, I've been spending my time on Y." Then you need systems in your life to remind you. This gets to the science of to-do lists. How should you write a to do list? There's a bunch of studies that look at this. Most people, the way they write to do lists, is they sit and they write all the things that they need to do, right? They use a to do list as a memory list. That's great because we shouldn't carry those around in our head, right?

Charles Duhigg:

David Allen says, "Your brain is good for things, but not remembering things." Go ahead and make a memory list. But that is not your to-do list. Your to-do list is, you look at your memory list, you try and figure out what's the most important thing on the memory list. And then you put that on the to-do list

and then you stop. You don't give yourself options of seven things to do tomorrow, because inevitably you're going to choose the easiest thing. You're going to use the thing that you can check off the list fastest. You're going to choose the thing that gives you cognitive closure. No, you choose one thing. The most important thing from that memory list. Don't give yourself any outs, put that on your to-do list, and that's what you do when you wake up, because that's the thing that's going to make the difference.

Carey Nieuwhof:

That's so good. Do you think that was a key to your friend's productivity, the medical doctor?

Charles Duhigg:

Atul?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Confirmed.

Charles Duhigg:

Yeah, I don't know. That's a good question. Because he never really got back to me. He never told me. I think so. I think that one of the things that Atul is good at, and I'm sure you've found this when you've talked to leaders, that they're very good at being focused. They're very good at maintaining focus and not allowing them to get distracted. There's been all these studies done of how most people use to-do lists and about 15% of people, when they're coming up with a to-do list, first of all, they love to have a crowded to-do list, because it makes them feel they know what they got to get done. But number two, about 15% of the people will write down something on their to-do list that they've already finished, because it feels so good to cross it off. That's the opposite of what a to-do list is supposed to do for you.

Charles Duhigg:

And so I think that Atul and people like him, I think they're very good at saying, "Look, there are 30 to 3,000 things I could do tomorrow. There is one most important thing. There's one thing that if I get it done tomorrow, it will change what happens afterwards." And so they go ahead and they do that. The thing that has the most impact and they don't get distracted by everything else.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Can you explain a little bit about cognitive tunneling and how it helps you become more productive?

Charles Duhigg:

Cognitive tunneling is actually a bad thing. What happens with cognitive tunneling is, when you are in a situation where you feel overwhelmed, when there's too much information, we can easily go into a cognitive tunnel where we will focus on the most obvious or the most shiny piece of information. This happens a lot. For instance, in the book, we tell the story of someone flying a plane, where basically there's a bunch of alarms going off. And some alarms are more important than other alarms, but this pilot, he becomes focused on this one alarm and he becomes focused on basically doing something that doesn't matter, trying to get the wings of the plane level. When what really matters is that the speed keeps getting slower and slower and slower. But he gets drawn into this cognitive tunnel. We've all experienced this.

Charles Duhigg:

Think about the last time you're driving on the freeway, you're going the speed limit, right? You're not doing anything wrong. You see a police car out of the corner of your eye. And the first thing you do is slow down, right? You hit the brake. The reason why is because a police car oftentimes will push us into a cognitive tunnel. We will become so focused on the police car that we react immediately to it, because it's a threat or because it's shiny or because it stands out. And so a lot of maintaining focus and managing our own focus is about learning to recognize when you're getting drawn into a cognitive tunnel and not allowing it to happen, because you give up decision-making power when that happens. "I'm just going to focus on the alarm that's right in front of me, I'm going to focus on the email that just popped into my inbox. Even though I know that there's other more important things to do."

Charles Duhigg:

"This person just came into my office and they said, 'We need a meeting right now.' And even though I know this person is the fourth most important thing for me today, I say yes, because they're right in front of me." That's what we want to avoid. The opposite of cognitive tunneling is what's known as situational awareness, right? This is actually a phrase that comes from aviation. And it means something very specific in aviation. What it means is, it means having systems in place that remind you to pay attention to what you are focusing on and make sure you're focusing on the right thing. One of the ways we do that, is we get into a habit of questioning the stories that are inside of our own heads. We all develop stories that tell us what to focus on. We call them heuristics. We call them other things.

Charles Duhigg:

We need to be in a habit of second guessing those stories, so that we're not three weeks into a project that we never should have started in the first place, just because we're on autopilot, and we're following the story that's inside of our head, instead of asking if there's better stories out there.

Carey Nieuwhof:

It's almost like limiting your options too much. You can tune narrowly focus on something that's going nowhere.

Charles Duhigg:

Absolutely.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And not going to solve your problem. You've got a section in the book about innovation as well. I wanted to drill down on that before we wrap up today, because innovation, I think is something we need. The world is pretty chaotic. The last 18 months have been upside down and backwards. A lot of leaders are looking at strategic planning for 2022. Are you kidding me? I don't know whether I can plan for November, let alone for an entire year. What are some keys you've found to productive innovation in leadership?

Charles Duhigg:

Yeah. It's a really good question. Because it's not just productive innovation, it's also innovation on demand, right? You're exactly right. In this world that we are living in, you cannot wait for the brainstorm. You have someone who comes in and they say, "I need a new idea in 25 minutes." And you

need to be able to productively be innovative right now. And so there's actually been a lot of research has been done on this. And again, it comes back to these cognitive routines, to these mental habits. What people have found is that within most settings, the most innovative people are not the most creative people. We think of creativity as the artist waiting for a brainstorm, somebody who has this completely original idea, that's not where most innovation comes from. Where most innovation comes from is what's known, the product of people who are known as innovation brokers.

Charles Duhigg:

What they do is they take a well-established idea from one setting and they drop it in a new setting or they take two well-established ideas and they combine them in a new way. Right? A perfect example of this is West Side Story, the musical West Side Story, right? Why is West Side Story such a beloved musical? Well, when you think about it, there's really not a lot of new stuff in there. There's a lot of old stuff that are combined in new ways, right? There's salsa music, which has been around for hundreds of years, but there's salsa music combined with New York, combined with teenagers, combined with Romeo and Juliet. So salsa, New York, teenagers, Romeo and Juliet, those are all old things, but they're brought together in a new way. There's actually a great business example of this, which is, there was this design firm in the 1980s that got an assignment to invent a new helmet for kids.

Charles Duhigg:

And so for like two years they worked on this and all they could come up with was stuff that looked like a football helmet or a motorcycle helmet. And then they hired this guy who was a boat builder. I don't know if you've ever seen how boats are built. What you do is you basically build the ribs of the boat. You build these long planks and then you lay wood on top of the ribs. The reason why you do it that way is because, if a boat hits a rock, the ribs will distribute the force of the impact. And so this boat builder, he's like, "What if I just build a boat hole the size of someone's head, right?" With ribs going back and forth, and then holes in between the ribs. That's the invention of the bike element. This thing that all of us own. It's a boat hole on people's heads and it works really, really well.

Charles Duhigg:

That guy was not creative. He was frankly like a stoner. The reason he was hired was because he was selling weed to the owner of the design firm. But the reason why his idea worked was because he took the idea of boat building and he brought it into a new setting. The question is, twofold. Number one, how can you expose yourself to new ideas? Right? Because you just have to get exposed to different kinds of ideas and different kinds of settings to see what is accepted, what is cliched in one setting. And then how can you force yourself to see the connections? That's where this act of working, of routines that force you to think, comes into play. I mentioned West Side Story, salsa dancing and kids, and Romeo and Juliet, the guy who was the driving force behind West Side Story, was this guy named Jerry Robbins. He was the choreographer.

Charles Duhigg:

Jerry Robbins was super curious. He went to all these jitterbug contests, all over New York City. He loved reading the classics, but he also loved reading all these trashy dime store novels about gang life. He would read everything. He was just curious. But that's not why he was an innovation broker. What he would do every night, is he would go home and he would write these letters every single night to his friends. These letters that were 10 or 15 pages long. Letters that were incomprehensible. He's mailed them to his friends and his friends would be like, "Jerry, you got to stop sending me, man. Edit yourself,

do something, none of this makes any sense." But he wasn't writing the letters for them. He was writing the letters for himself. Because when he was writing these letters and he was like, "Today I went to a jitterbug contest and then I read some Romeo and Juliet."

Charles Duhigg:

That's when he starts seeing the connection between these ideas. That is the work. Writing letters is hard, right? Your hand gets cramped up. It's boring. You have to edit yourself sometimes, not in Jerry Robbins' case, but he did this work. That is what made him an innovation broker. He had this cognitive routine where he forced himself to think about the ideas he had seen that day. That's where the innovation came from.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Fascinating. What you say about innovation brokers resonates. There's the pitch in Hollywood. I'm sure you're familiar with it. But when they were trying to sell the screenplay for Alien, nobody wanted to buy it. And then the pitch was, "It's Jaws in Space," right? And the people went, "Okay, something I know."

Charles Duhigg:

I get it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Or even thinking of Apple, is that Apple never really innovated. Steve Jobs, the story of the invention iPhone was he hated keyboards, they kept bringing him the first phone and he's like, "No, no, no, no." Pretty sure this is from Isaacson's biography. He sees this Garmin GPS, in the old days where cars had GPSs and it's a touch screen. He saw that and he said, "We'll build a phone like that. That touch screen becomes your phone." Then they went back and the first prototype. So the iPhone came out of that. You're talking about that thing where you're adapting to your situation, some existing idea that you saw somewhere else. Is that right?

Charles Duhigg:

That's exactly right. Think about behavioral economics, right? This thing that has won Nobel prizes, that has transformed how we think, about the human behavior. Behavior economics was basically, there were a bunch of psychologists and economists and they said, "There's a bunch of problems in psychology, a bunch of questions in psychology that have existed for 100 years. There's a bunch of tools in economics that have existed for 100 years. Don't invent anything new. Literally just jam these together, try and solve a psychological problem with an economics tool." If you talk to Kahneman and these guys who like, Tversky the guy who's passed away now, the guys who invented behavioral economics, they're not that creative. They're just people who jammed together things that had never been combined before. And from there it's automatic.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, that sounds fantastic. Anything else about innovation you would tell leaders as we're all turning our mind to a new season and the uncertainty ahead?

Charles Duhigg:

I think the only other thing being that, again, getting back to the habit loop, something only becomes habitual when you reward people for it. Right? The thing about innovation is that it involves almost all things that are actually productive, involves some activity that looks like a waste of time on the face of it. Going to a jitterbug contest and then reading Romeo and Juliet, and then writing a letter to your friends about these things that you saw that day, none of that looks productive, right? On the face of it. None of that looks like a good use of time, but that is where the idea from West Side Story comes from. Hiring some guy who's a boat builder to work in a design firm, honestly because the guy sells you weed, seems a terrible, terrible use of money and resources. In this case it might have been, except that this guy came up with this brilliant idea, right?

Charles Duhigg:

The question becomes, how do you reward people for doing things that are productive in the long term, as opposed to rewarding them for being tied to their email and responding to you within five minutes?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Checking off their to-do list of things that probably don't even matter if they got done.

Charles Duhigg:

That's exactly right.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Wow. Wow. What are you working on now? You got a new book coming out?

Charles Duhigg:

Yeah. I'm working on a book right now. I'm trying to figure it out. It's slow going. It's about communication and the science of communication. Hopefully I'll figure it out pretty soon.

Carey Nieuwhof:

We'll look forward to that. Charles, people can find you in the New Yorker, where else can they find you these days?

Charles Duhigg:

I'm on Twitter, @cduhigg on Twitter. I have a website, charlesduhigg.com, if you just plug my name into Google, I'll come up in many ways. I will say I respond to every single reader email that I get. I don't consider email a waste of time when it's from a reader because I feel I owe it to you. And so sometimes it takes a week or two, a little bit of time. But if you send me an email, I promise I will read it and I will respond to.

Carey Nieuwhof:

They can find that on the internet?.

Charles Duhigg:

It's just charles@charlesduhigg.com or just come to my website and it's right there.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Awesome. Awesome. Charles, thanks so much for being with us today and helping us get better.

Charles Duhigg:

Thanks for having me on.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Completely agree that deep thinking is the killer app. That is such a good insight. That's why I'm excited to get my book *At Your Best* into your hands. We'll tell you a little bit more about that in a moment, where you can get it. I've also got an Ask Me Anything About Productivity session with Jim. Jim wants to know, "How do you toe the line between everyday stress which happens and sliding into burnout?" That's a very personal question. It's something I'm going to answer in just a moment. But first I want to tee up the next episode. On the next episode, who do we have? We have Mike Todd. Michael Todd from Transformation Church is back. This was a long, wonderful, very revealing personal conversation about so many different things. Here's an excerpt.

Michael Todd:

I found out that there was a time when I was 11 or 12 years old. My actual gifting that I believe that God gave me gift-wise, is music. I played drums since I was two and I had this desire to play for the Big Sap. I remember sitting in the back of the choir pit with my drumstick there at rehearsals that no kids were at. But I'm there, I'm waiting for my opportunity and they never let me play. I'm just like, "Why won't they let me play? I know I'm better than him. Why won't they let me play?" I remember being in that moment, making an inner vow that I will be so good at whatever I do that nobody will ever be able to deny that I should be doing what I want to do.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Man, I love Mike. He is leading one of the fastest growing churches in America, one of the largest by far. We're also going to talk about how he took the 103 days off and the church actually grew. It's crazy. You're going to enjoy that. If you subscribe, you get that automatically for free. Thanks for hanging with us during this month where we've tried to make you more productive, not only through my book, but by bringing you some of the world's leading experts on productivity. That's what September was all about. I hope it made you more productive. We love bringing you conversations that into your AirPods. Now it's time for Ask Me Anything About Productivity. We are going to take a question from Jim. Well, here's Jim's question.

Jim:

Hi Carey. This is Jim from San Rafael, California. Here is my question. I went through burnout about four to five years ago, and now I notice that certain levels of stress in ministry make me nervous that I'll go back to that place again. How do I balance my acceptance of stress as just a part of life with a healthy respect for knowing my personal limits? Thanks.

Carey Nieuwhof:

Jim, I feel that. I'll tell you, I went through about probably seven to eight years after burning out where I had that nervousness that you describe about, "Uh oh, stressful day. Am I burning out again?" Because as any leader who's listening to this knows, if you have burned out, you never want to go back there. It

was the most painful season of my life. Never want to go back. Actually asking that question again and again, eventually led me to a lot of the framework in my book *At Your Best*, because I was obsessed with this idea that having been there, I never want to go back. You're also right. Very perceptive question. Yeah. Life is stressful. Do I have stressful days? Of course I have stressful days. What do you do? How do you know the difference?

Carey Nieuwhof:

Well, there is the central line of the book, which is simply that I think the goal in life, at least for me, and I hope for you, is to live in a way today that will help you thrive tomorrow. I break that down into five categories. Am I thriving spiritually as a person of faith? Am I thriving emotionally, relationally, physically, how's my physical health and then even financially? It's not about having a lot of money. It's just having margin, that's all. Because I find if I've got margin in those five categories, if I'm growing in my relationship with Christ, in my case, if I'm physically fit and doing a reasonable job of that, if there's financial margin, if I'm emotionally healthy and relationally healthy, then I can handle almost any of the stress that comes my way, because there's so much stuff that is not in your control, but those five things to a staggering extent are in your control.

Carey Nieuwhof:

When you use the *At Your Best* system, you get into the Thrive Cycle as I describe it in the book, that will increase your margin in all five areas. Now, sometimes that can slip away on us. You've got to watch some of the signs of burnout creeping back in. You've got to look for your passion level. Is it dropping? Your emotional health, are you experiencing emotions the way you should experience them, feeling the highs as highs and the lows as lows? Are you just numb or are you cynical? You got to look for signs of self medication. Of course that can be alcohol, drugs, sex. It can also be overworking. It can also be overeating. You got to watch to that. But I would say probably the biggest thing, because life is stressful. The season that we've been in for the last year and a half is crazy and we really don't have a lot of control over that, is focus on the things you can control and then watch how quickly you snap back.

Carey Nieuwhof:

I launched my book, we recorded this a couple weeks in advance, so I launched my book this week. I promise you, after book launch, I was tired. I was tired. It's a good thing. It's a good tired, but I was tired, to the point where, the night after book launch, my goal was just to stay up until it was time to go to bed. That's about as ambitious as I got. However, I got eight and a half hours sleep. The next day I felt better. Sleep and rest should refuel you. There should be a snap back. There should be a cause and effect. And if you're in a really difficult season, if you got a personal health crisis or somebody close to you is sick or someone close to you died, or there's relational conflict, that might take two or three days or a week, but there should be a cause and effect, because stress is something you can recover from, burnout is much more complicated than that.

Carey Nieuwhof:

And then in addition to that, I would say, use the framework that I talk about in, *At Your Best* to constantly recalibrate your life. I know heading into October over now, I'm into a brand new season. I've launched the book and we're going to continue to support it and talk about it. But the big work associated with launching a book is done. I also finished a big renovation project, finally, in my backyard, which took way longer than I thought it would. Now I've got a new season. But travel season's also coming up in October and November. Now I've got to recalibrate for a new season. I'll be going through

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my calendar. I'll be going through how I spend my green zone, what I say yes to and paying attention to that. Jim, this is a question I live almost every day, I'm asking those questions. This is how I'm approaching it.

Carey Nieuwhof:

15 years on the other side of burnout, it's worked so far. I hope it works for you. I hope that's helpful. If you've got a question about productivity, you can leave it for me. You can simply go to careynieuwhof.com/podcast. We're back with a fresh episode next time. If you haven't yet checked out *At Your Best*, I would love for you to do that. I just want to help you get time, energy and priorities working for you, not against you, free up some margin in your life and help you live in a way today that will help you thrive tomorrow. That's the heartbeat of everything we do around here and it's at the very heart of my new book, *At Your Best*. Thank you so much everybody. It's been a great September together. Can't wait for next month. Mike Todd is going to kick it off. In the meantime, I hope our time together today has helped you thrive in life and leadership.

Announcer:

You've been listening to The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership podcast. Join us next time for more insights on leadership, change and personal growth, to help you lead like never before.