

Practice Makes Permanent: How Leaders Rewire Behavior That Sticks Under Pressure

Knowing what to do differently is not the problem. Here is why leadership behavior changes when it does, and what actually makes it permanent.

By Dan Allinger, PCC, MNLP | AGL Coaching | aglcoaching.com

The Signal

The workshop was excellent. Everyone left energized. Two weeks later, the leader was running meetings the same way, asking the same questions, and getting the same results. Not because they forgot what they learned. They remembered it clearly. They just were not doing it.

The instinct is to diagnose this as a discipline problem. If I could just be more consistent. If I had more willpower. If I were more committed.

Willpower is significantly overrated. Most leaders who fail to sustain new behavior are not lacking commitment. They are misunderstanding what behavior change actually requires, because they are trying to do something the brain is not designed to do.

You can't "stop" a habit. You have to rewire around it.

The brain stores habit patterns in a structure called the basal ganglia as automatic loops: a trigger, a routine, a reward. Once a loop is established, it does not get deleted. It gets outcompeted. When a new behavior is practiced intentionally and repeatedly, the new neural pathway strengthens. The old one atrophies from disuse. The old habit does not disappear overnight. It fades because the new pattern has become the path of least resistance.

This changes the entire diagnosis. The question is not how do I stop doing X? It is what will I do instead, and how will I practice it until the new pattern wins?

The gap shows up in predictable ways:

- A leader knows they need to listen more but keeps finishing sentences
- A manager is trying not to explode or be reactive in meetings, but continues to do so
- An executive can articulate the right approach in coaching and revert to the old one in the board meeting

The Science

Think about the last time you traveled and stayed in a hotel, even in the same time zone. Your toothbrush was in a different spot. The sounds overnight were different. The hallways looked the same but were not your hallways. By early afternoon, you were exhausted in a way that a normal day at home would not have produced. The reason is not the travel itself. It is that your brain was burning through metabolic energy faster than usual. Every familiar habit at home runs on almost no fuel. In an unfamiliar environment, nothing runs on autopilot, and the tank empties faster.

This is the foundation of how leadership behavior works under pressure.

The brain defaults to what it has practiced most

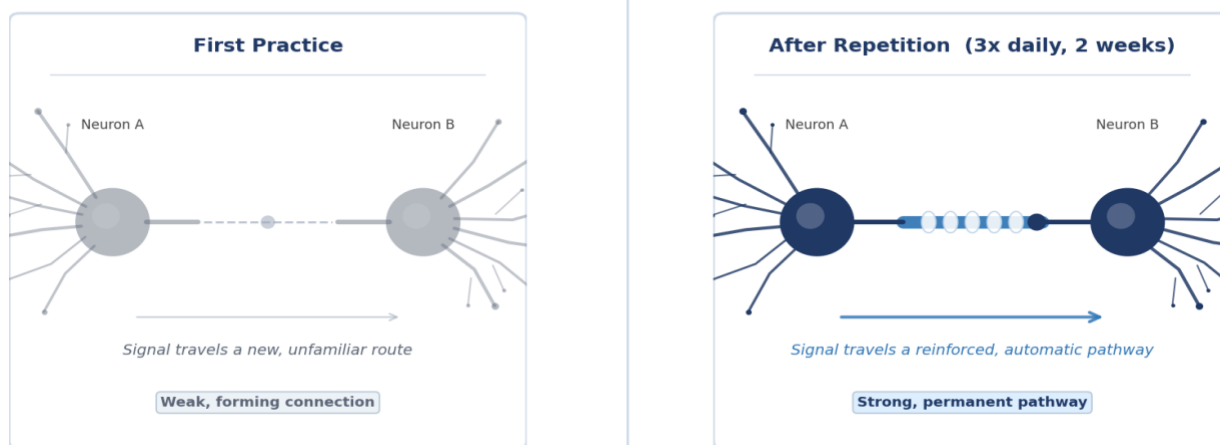
Under pressure, the brain does not rise to your intentions. It routes to established pathways. The prefrontal cortex handles deliberate, intentional thought, and it is expensive for the brain to run. When stress activates the sympathetic nervous system, the brain conserves resources by bypassing deliberate thought and running the patterns it knows best. The ones you have used for years. That is why the leader who handles a difficult conversation well in a coaching session can fall back on the old pattern the moment a real conversation gets heated.

This is not a character flaw. It is a design feature. The brain under pressure is doing exactly what it is wired to do. The only way to change what runs under pressure is to make the new behavior the established pattern, which takes deliberate, repeated practice before the pressure hits.

Neurons that fire together, wire together

Every time a new behavior is practiced, the brain does something specific. It builds a fatty lipid protein called myelin around the neural pathway, forming the myelin sheath. Think of it as insulation on a wire. As the myelin builds with each repetition, signal loss along the pathway decreases. The stimulus travels more efficiently. The brain recognizes this efficiency and begins to favor the pathway. Eventually, the myelinated pathway requires so little metabolic energy to run that the brain routes to it automatically. That is what we call a habit.

How Deliberate Practice Rewires the Brain



Each deliberate practice builds myelin around the neural pathway, reducing signal loss and making the route faster and more automatic with every repetition.

Have you ever driven down the highway and realized you cannot account for the last ten minutes of the drive? Everyone has experienced this. You were not unconscious. Your brain shifted driving to autopilot because the pathway is so thoroughly myelinated that it no longer requires conscious attention, and your metabolic energy was quietly reprioritized to whatever else you were thinking about. This is not distraction. It is the brain's efficiency system working exactly as designed.

The same mechanism builds leadership habits. Repeat the new behavior often enough, and the brain eventually runs it without effort, including under pressure.

The brain needs to be open to rewire

Here is something most leadership development ignores. The brain cannot build new pathways efficiently while it is in a threat state. Chronic pressure, deficit-focused feedback, and environments where people feel evaluated or unsafe narrow cognitive bandwidth. People in that state can comply. They cannot truly learn.

The brain learns best in what Richard Boyatzis's research identifies as a Positive Emotional Attractor state: open, aspirational, and psychologically safe. This is not about making development comfortable. It is about recognizing that the same pressure leaders use to drive performance is often the same pressure that makes rewiring impossible.

In AGL's TacComm™ practice, this is the foundation of how leaders build new behaviors. Create the conditions for safety before the practice begins. Keep the focus on where you are going rather than what you are getting wrong. The brain moves toward goals more effectively than it moves away from failure. That is not philosophy. It is how the system works.

KEY INSIGHT

Insight opens a window. Practice builds the pathway. Repetition closes it as a habit.

Every repetition adds myelin. Every layer of myelin makes the stimulus more efficient. When the pathway is efficient enough, the brain routes to it automatically. You cannot stop an old habit. You replace it by building a stronger one.

The Shift

Three principles from AGL's coaching practice and the TacComm™ methodology separate leaders who build new behaviors that hold from those who cycle through the same development goals year after year.

1. Practice the behavior, not the concept

Concepts do not get practiced. Behaviors do. Be a better listener is not a practice. Ask one clarifying question before offering a solution is.

The more specific the behavior, the faster the myelin builds. Broad intentions stay in the prefrontal cortex, vulnerable to pressure. Specific micro-behaviors, repeated in real conversations, become automatic.

The TacComm™ micro-behavior principle: identify the smallest version of the new behavior that produces a meaningful result, and practice that specific thing. Not the idea behind it. The thing itself.

2. Start today

The neurological window for encoding new behavior does not wait for a convenient time. When a new behavior is introduced, the brain is primed. Apply it within the next 24 hours and the connection begins to form. Wait three days and the priming fades. The learning is remembered but never wired.

AGL's TacComm™ methodology is direct: start today. Commit to practicing the new behavior three times a day for the next two weeks. Not as an extra item on an already overloaded list. The goal is to fire the stimulus as often as possible during the normal course of your day, at work and outside it.

A question asked differently at dinner. A pause before responding in a conversation with a neighbor. A moment in a meeting where you chose to listen rather than answer. It does not matter where. What matters is that the stimulus fires.

One behavior at a time. Not three. Practicing multiple new behaviors simultaneously divides focus and slows every pathway. Pick the one that matters most right now and practice only that until it is automatic. Then add the next.

For many behaviors, two weeks of intentional practice builds the foundation. More complex habits take longer. Either way, this is not about perfection. It is about progression. Think of it as going to the mental gym every morning. You do not expect to lift the heaviest weight on day one. You show up, you do the work, and the compounding takes care of the rest.

3. Reflect and close the loop

Most leaders evaluate a new behavior with a single question: did it work? That is a binary result that misses the learning.

Deliberate reflection uses a different set of questions. What happened in the other person when I tried that? What did I notice? What would I do differently in the next conversation? This reflection, done briefly but intentionally within a few hours of the conversation, is where the learning encodes. The doing opens the pathway. The reflection deepens it.

Accountability accelerates the rewiring. The first form is self-logging: writing down the number of times you practiced each day keeps the commitment visible and honest. The second is a coach or trusted peer who checks in regularly and can observe what is harder to see from inside the conversation. For AGL coaching clients, the third is an automated daily check-in delivered by text or email, which logs each practice session and generates a progress chart that both the leader and coach can track over time. What feels inconsistent in the moment often looks, in the data, like steady compounding.

START TODAY

Choose one specific behavior. One, not three.

Practice it three times today during the normal course of your day, at work and outside it. Do the same tomorrow. Continue for two weeks.

After each practice, take two minutes: What happened in the room? What did I notice? What would I do differently?

That is the complete loop. That is how the pathway forms.

The Practice

You cannot prepare to practice. The preparation is not the work. The conversation is the work.

The sequence is always the same. Identify the specific behavior. Start today. Reflect deliberately. Repeat. The first three attempts feel conscious and effortful. By the tenth, it starts to feel natural. By the thirtieth, it begins to run automatically.

But automatic under calm conditions is not the finish line.

At SWAT school, we trained until the drill felt solid. Three shooters, three side-by-side targets. No scopes. All three had to fire at precisely the same moment so that only one shot was heard, and all three had to hit a one-inch circle. We practiced until it was unusual to get it wrong.

Then the instructors added pressure. Flash-bang charges, noise, chaos, introduced mid-drill. We were terrible. Like we had never practiced at all.

Adding the pressure was not punishment. It was the next required stage of training. The pathway existed. Now it had to be reinforced under conditions that matched the real environment where it would be needed. We kept practicing, this time with the flash-bangs. Eventually, we rarely missed: shooting simultaneously, hitting the target, even as the chaos hit.

Leadership behavior follows the same arc. Build the pathway under normal conditions first. Then deliberately practice in the moments that are harder: the difficult conversation, the high-stakes meeting, the situation where the old pattern is loudest. Not because you will be perfect. Because that is where the wiring deepens.

The next article in this series, *"The Accountability Gap: Why Your Team Nods and Then Does Nothing,"* examines the moment where behavior change most often collapses: the conversation that produced agreement but not ownership. If this article explains why change is hard, that one addresses the specific moment where it either takes hold or does not.

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About the Author



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Dan began his career as a military criminal investigator, learning the behavioral science of interview and interrogation, and making decisions under pressure with incomplete information and real consequences. He went on to serve as a global Chief Human Resources Officer and international board member before founding AGL Coaching in 2017. He has studied Neuroscience for Business at MIT, holds his ICF Professional Certified Coach credential (PCC), and is a Master Practitioner of Neurolinguistic Programming (MNLP). Dan is also the author of TacComm™, a practical communication system built on behavioral science to increase influence and sharpen decision-making under pressure.

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AGL Coaching is a global executive coaching and leadership development firm based in Houston, Texas. The AGL Alliance brings approximately 40 coaches to client engagements across North America, Europe, and beyond. Most have held executive roles in their own careers, spanning functions including human resources, operations, finance, technology, and general management. The Alliance works across industries, cultures, and languages, which means AGL can match the right coach to the right client regardless of geography or sector. The firm's methodology is practical, grounded in behavioral science, and built for leaders who need results that hold under real-world conditions.

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