

Nuggets and Bright Lines

- *Know your W.I.G.s (wildly important goals)*
- *Too small to fail baby steps.*
- *Organise your space*



Habits Habits Habits

Habits, habits, habits. Boring, boring, boring. Maybe they are but as well as being possibly the most talked about subject at the beginning of January each year, are they worth understanding at a deeper level?

James Clear obviously believes so. In his book 'Atomic Habits' he discusses at length and with expert and personal insight what exactly lies behind this over discussed and often misunderstood topic.

So why should we be so interested in habits? Well let's begin with the premise that the existence of life at even the most basic level of the simplest one cell organism has a relevance to habits. The existence of life by default means there is a goal to be achieved due to the natural inbuilt drive for survival within an organism. As a result this organism will repeatedly perform activities that facilitate its existence. It will naturally create a habit. Extrapolate this simple process and apply it to human beings and you will see that we too as a species have drives that naturally force us to breathe, drink, eat, maintain temperature, reproduce, communicate and look to achieve a myriad of alternatives goals once the basics of life are satisfied. Our physiology is such that the repetition of these actions becomes easier over time. Very simply: the things we do, we naturally continue to do. This is habit formation. Once formed habits are like a runaway train, they just keep going, getting faster and faster unless conscious force is applied to stop them. The hard yards, friction is in the starting off, in the beginning of the process.

Why is this point important? Experts and great thinkers have all stated in their own way that success and what you become has a lot to do with what you consistently do over a period of time rather than one significant life changing happenstance. The key phrase here is 'consistent basis'. Let's use an example to illustrate. The habit I am aiming to establish is writing on a daily basis. Specifically the goal is to write a minimum of one paragraph everyday, six days a week. What is important here is that it is achievable and measurable. At this stage we are not concerned with the quality of the output, only the formation of the habit. Optimisation of the outcome will come later. This is where a lot of people fall. They make the mistake of pressurising themselves into creating outcomes which are unrealistic. When the desired outcome does not manifest they get an overwhelm of failure emotion and the whole process stops. The lesson is to focus solely on the establishment of the habit and ignore the outcomes.

It is about initially only being concerned with allowing the habit to be established before being too interested in maximising its effectiveness. In previous centuries when a king or leader wanted a castle to live in, as step one he ordered his men to find a suitable place to build it. When this was achieved they built a relatively feeble structure out of wood which did not resemble anything like the magnificent structure that was to follow. This was step two. Over the following years the wooden structure was slowly and systematically replaced with impenetrable stone walls, castellated towers, a drawbridge and moat. This was step three and often took decades. What has this to do with habits. It may sound ridiculous but if the individuals concerned were overly concerned with the quality details of the end product during the initial stages and became frustrated with the seeming lack of progress then the magnificent castle would never be built.

The lesson is to know what the ultimate goal is, to be concerned primarily with the next steps and focus on consistent activity. This is the process. It is one of an evolution of corrections and adjustments but most of all it requires a consistency of action. So with the habits in our lives, no matter how small in and of itself, over a period of time the effects will compound and have a significant impact.

A great deal is made when discussing habits and habit formation about the role of will power, Good old fashioned resolve and stickability to see us through and resist all temptations that come our way. is the old adage. Apparently however, according to the latest research this is not the case. I am sure you will agree that in reality most attempts to create a new habit don't go the way of a seamless transition to a new way of life yielding great results. What is more the norm is a fast start with high levels of determination. Then comes the challenge of everyday life and its natural, messy ability to create obstacles such as tiredness, illness, hunger and other distractions that become too much to handle. This commonly sees the end of the new mission and bingo it is back to the norm with the associated self loathing, a drop off the cliff and a 'forget it' or a gritty climb back to face the will power slog again. Sound familiar? Welcome to the human race.

So is there an alternative? The recent research strongly indicates that this 'will power' approach is one probably destined to fail. The reason being that will power alone is insufficient to carry us through. Will power it appears is, it seems, like a muscle. It can respond to our conscious will but it has a finite ability to continue and at some point, like a muscle, will be unable to do what you ask it to.

So how do we combat this weakness and form habits that will last and have a positive impact? According to the research there are a number of key things we can do to facilitate a successful habit formation:

1. We need to firstly make sure what we are engaged in is something important to us. We are all inclined to naturally do what it is we are interested in, what is enjoyable and important to us. Make sure this is relevant to your habit. For example it has to be more

important to you to have productive, efficient days by getting a full eight hours of sleep each night than it is to stay up and watch television.

2. It should be one of only a few things you are concerned with. Having a narrow focus on important activities is key. If you are trying to achieve too much in too many areas you will likely overwhelm yourself and none will be successful. Much better to do one or two things well. Consolidate them and then add to the portfolio of successes steadily.
3. The habit should be so easy to do initially that it is not an issue. The thought of not doing it should not even come into it. Make sure that you begin with a baby step activity that builds the habit formation first. Strengthening the single strand of spider's silk into a steel cord will come over time.
4. We should commit to it being an everyday thing. This is easy to do when it is not a big thing.
5. We should facilitate making it easy to do by organising our day and environment so it's as difficult as possible to not do it. For example if it is an exercise activity, lay your kit out the night before so you need to trip over your training shoes to avoid them on your way out of your room. If it is a meditation practice set up your simple 'place' so it is always available to you to just sit and get on with it.

So there we have five key elements that give you the best chance of creating habits that will last. Imagine if you had just three or four habits in your life that were nailed on non negotiable actions you did daily come what may that progressed you a degree at a time towards your goals. Imagine what your life would be like in five years time if you had a health habit, a relationship habit, a financial habit and a personal habit that were moving you in this way.

The Author

Rob is a UEFA qualified coach with a League Managers Association qualification and a science and medicine background. He has worked in the football industry in Europe, The USA, Asia and Africa; at International, Premiership, League, Non-League and grass roots levels with both World Cup and European Championship experience.



Website <https://www.robryles.co.uk/>
Podcast: <https://apple.co/2OaaMRh>
App <http://www.ourgameapp.online>
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