



The leader's ultimate cheat sheet to building habits that actually stick

Let habits do your heavy lifting as you reach toward your goals.

I recently wrote about how habits can make your desired behaviors automatic, putting you on your way to success with less effort. Good habits will perpetuate themselves once established, but the trick is getting them in place.

In working with hundreds of clients as a leadership coach, I've discovered the easiest ways to build habits that stick. So today, I want to focus on the three simplest things you can do to embed your target habits.

First, let's quickly recap how habits are formed. (For more detail, check out [this recent post.](#)) Researchers have identified a simple neurological loop, as journalist Charles Duhigg reports in his book "[The Power of Habit](#)," in which a cue (such as a certain time, place or event) triggers a behavior or routine which delivers a reward (and reinforces the loop.)

Repeating this loop builds strong neural pathways that can never be eliminated. The good news is that you can learn to ignore bad habits or overlay them with stronger, better habits.

If you want to, say, stop procrastinating on your work, you need to identify the cue and the reward that procrastination delivers. Then you need to figure out a better routine that delivers the same reward. What need or craving does the habit satisfy?

With procrastination, the reward from putting off what needs to be done is often temporary relief of stress you feel about the work. You can re-engineer that habit by giving yourself a stress-relieving reward for NOT delaying.

For example, when it's time to do your next monthly report (the cue), set a timer for 30 minutes and commit to chip away at it for a half hour. Then give yourself a reward, like a quick stroll to pick up a latte. Then come back for another 30 minutes. As this pattern gets more

ingrained, you will build a new neurological loop and can start phasing out the short-term rewards.

So with this basic habit formation pattern in mind, let's look at my three top tips for quickly building better habits.

1. Take baby steps – I've written before about [kaizen](#), the Japanese practice of continuous improvement through small and steady steps. The most important part of building a habit is getting going, so start with a step so small that it seems like a slam dunk.

Making major changes arouses the brain's fear response which leads to resistance to new behavior. (That's why we so often crash and burn when we try to change everything all at once.) So taking tiny steps the kaizen way circumvents this tendency, and after the first step, you can take another and keep building.

With this approach, your first step should be so easy it's almost ridiculous. Psychologist B.J. Fogg tackled his aversion to flossing by starting with flossing [just one tooth every day](#) and blogger Stephen Guise finally got himself into an exercise habit by starting with [just one push-up](#).

Fogg says this approach succeeds in part by planning for natural laziness. You can start with just one step that reduces the friction associated with your desired habit. So, say you want to get to work a half hour earlier every day. Start by just packing your briefcase the night before and putting it at the door. After doing that enough times that it's easy and automatic, take another step like setting your alarm clock to go off 5 minutes earlier in the morning. Rinse and repeat.

2. Don't rely on willpower – A lot of research has been done on self-control, and psychologists have discovered an effect called "[willpower depletion](#)" or "decision fatigue." Essentially after resisting temptation after temptation, your willpower "muscle" can get fatigued and make it hard for you to make the right choice. So the solution is to limit your choices and make the bad ones harder to access.

You can tackle this in two ways. First, try to create routines for as many mundane things as possible, so that you don't have to use up a lot of your mental bandwidth on the little stuff. "Boring is productive," [this Harvard Business Review article](#) proclaims. For example, eating the same breakfast and sticking to the same clothing combinations every day keeps you from having to make too many decisions about mundane details and squandering your mental energy.

Secondly, make it harder to make bad choices. If you can't resist eating cookies when you are trying to stick to a diet, don't bring them into your environment. If you have trouble speaking up in meetings, ask the coordinator ahead of time to give you a few minutes to discuss your new idea so that you can't chicken out later.

3. Harness the power of habit stacking – As we discussed, your brain builds a strong network of neural pathways to support your current behaviors. The more you repeat those behaviors, the stronger and more efficient those networks become.

You already have strong mental pathways for habits like answering the phone when it rings or making coffee when you get up. You can use these as a platform for building new habits by stacking on top of them.

To do this, you use your current habit as a trigger for a new habit. So, if your desired habit is to return emails more promptly, you could say that every time you get back to your desk from a meeting or getting a cup of coffee, you'll respond to two emails.

A related strategy popularized by Wharton behavioral economist Katherine Milkman is called [temptation bundling](#) in which you tie a habit you are trying to cultivate to something you enjoy. You bundle the habit you are trying to develop with a naturally appealing one. So, for example, she cites only letting yourself get a pedicure while catching up on overdue work or only listening to addictive audiobooks while exercising.

Give one of these strategies a try and let me know your results in the comments below. If you have questions or obstacles, get in touch with me [here](#). As athlete Jim Ryun says, "Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going."