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The Downside of Creating Good Habits

HABITS CREATE THE FOUNDATION FOR MASTERY. In chess, it is only after the basic movements of the pieces have become automatic that a player can focus on the next level of the game. Each chunk of information that is memorized opens up the mental space for more effortful thinking. This is true for any endeavor. When you know the simple movements so well that you can perform them without thinking, you are free to pay attention to more advanced details. In this way, habits are the backbone of any pursuit of excellence.

However, the benefits of habits come at a cost. At first, each repetition develops fluency, speed, and skill. But then, as a habit becomes automatic, you become less sensitive to feedback. You fall into mindless repetition. It becomes easier to let mistakes slide. When you can do it "good enough" on autopilot, you stop thinking about how to do it better.

The upside of habits is that we can do things without thinking. The downside of habits is that you get used to doing things a certain way and stop paying attention to little errors. You assume you're getting better because you're gaining experience. In reality, you are merely reinforcing your current habits—not improving them. In

fact, some research has shown that once a skill has been mastered there is usually a slight *decline* in performance over time.

Usually, this minor dip in performance is no cause for worry. You don't need a system to continuously improve how well you brush your teeth or tie your shoes or make your morning cup of tea. With habits like these, good enough is usually good enough. The less energy you spend on trivial choices, the more you can spend it on what really matters.

However, when you want to maximize your potential and achieve elite levels of performance, you need a more nuanced approach. You can't repeat the same things blindly and expect to become exceptional. Habits are necessary, but not sufficient for mastery. What you need is a combination of automatic habits and deliberate practice.

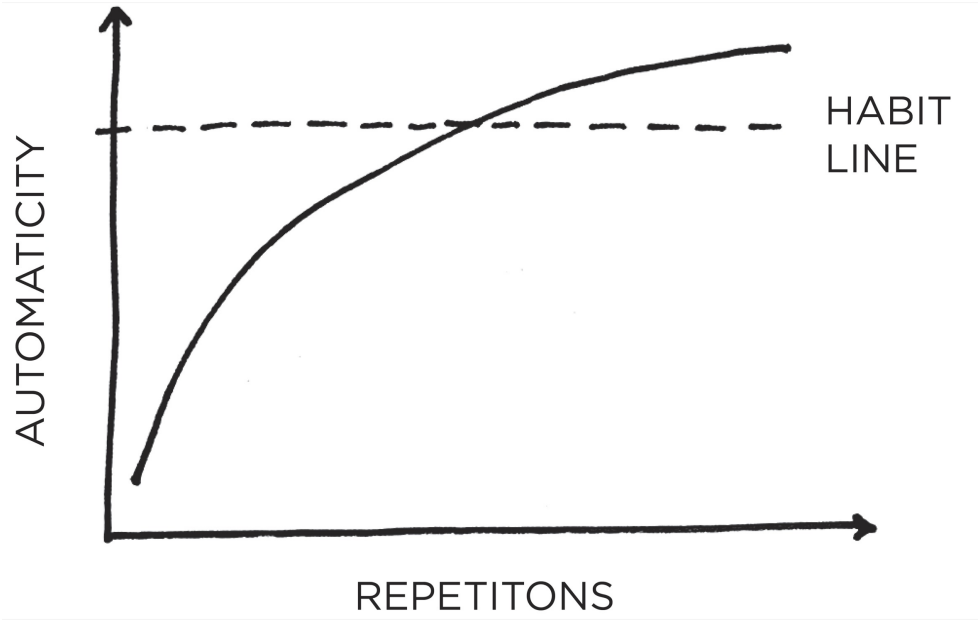
Habits + Deliberate Practice = Mastery

To become great, certain skills *do* need to become automatic. Basketball players need to be able to dribble without thinking before they can move on to mastering layups with their nondominant hand. Surgeons need to repeat the first incision so many times that they could do it with their eyes closed, so that they can focus on the hundreds of variables that arise during surgery. But after one habit has been mastered, you have to return to the effortful part of the work and begin building the next habit.

Mastery is the process of narrowing your focus to a tiny element of success, repeating it until you have internalized the skill, and then using this new habit as the foundation to advance to the next frontier of your development. Old tasks become easier the second time around, but it doesn't get easier overall because now you're pouring your energy into

the next challenge. Each habit unlocks the next level of performance. It’s an endless cycle.

MASTERING ONE HABIT



MASTERING A FIELD

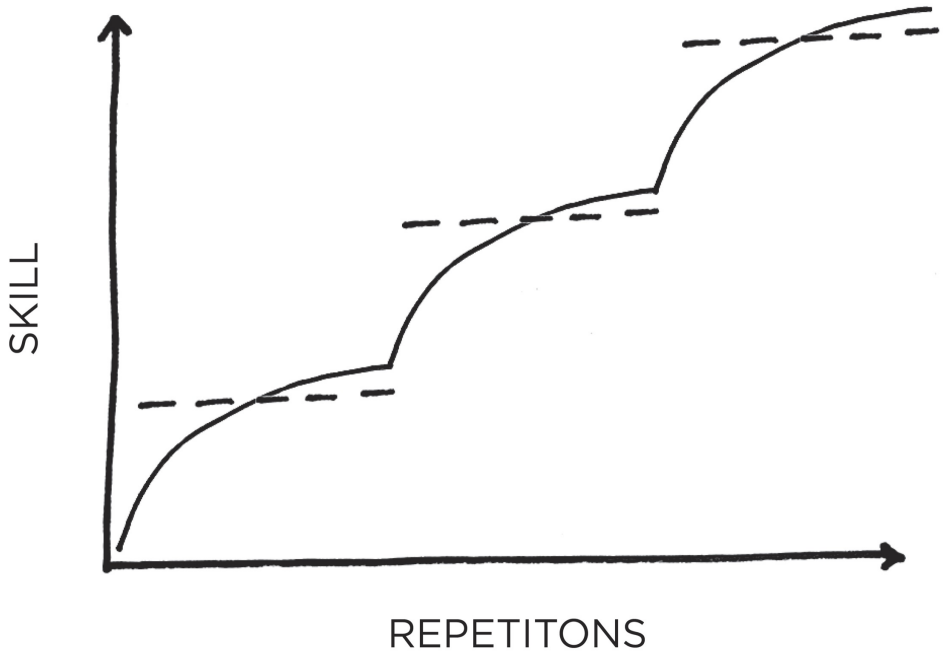


FIGURE 16: The process of mastery requires that you progressively layer improvements on top of one another, each habit building upon the last until a new level of performance has been reached and a higher range of skills has been internalized.

Although habits are powerful, what you need is a way to remain conscious of your performance over time, so you can continue to refine and improve. It is precisely at the moment when you begin to feel like you have mastered a skill—right when things are starting to feel automatic and you are becoming comfortable—that you must avoid slipping into the trap of complacency.

The solution? Establish a system for reflection and review.

HOW TO REVIEW YOUR HABITS AND MAKE ADJUSTMENTS

In 1986, the Los Angeles Lakers had one of the most talented basketball teams ever assembled, but they are rarely remembered that way. The team started the 1985–

1986 NBA season with an astounding 29–5 record. “The pundits were saying that we might be the best team in the history of basketball,” head coach Pat Riley said after the season. Surprisingly, the Lakers stumbled in the 1986 playoffs and suffered a season-ending defeat in the Western Conference Finals. The “best team in the history of basketball” didn’t even play for the NBA championship.

After that blow, Riley was tired of hearing about how much talent his players had and about how much promise his team held. He didn’t want to see flashes of brilliance followed by a gradual fade in performance. He wanted the Lakers to play up to their potential, night after night. In the summer of 1986, he created a plan to do exactly that, a system that he called the Career Best Effort program or CBE.

“When players first join the Lakers,” Riley explained, “we track their basketball statistics all the way back to high school. I call this Taking Their Number. We look for an accurate gauge of what a player can do, then build him into our plan for the team, based on the notion that he will maintain and then improve upon his averages.”

After determining a player’s baseline level of performance, Riley added a key step. He asked each player to “improve their output by at least 1 percent over the course of the season. If they succeeded, it would be a CBE, or Career Best Effort.” Similar to the British Cycling team that we discussed in Chapter 1, the Lakers sought peak performance by getting slightly better each day.

Riley was careful to point out that CBE was not merely about points or statistics but about giving your “best effort spiritually and mentally and physically.” Players got credit for “allowing an opponent to run into you when you know that a foul will be called against him, diving for loose balls, going after rebounds whether you are likely to get them or not, helping a teammate when the player he’s guarding has surged past him, and other ‘unsung hero’ deeds.”

As an example, let's say that Magic Johnson—the Lakers star player at the time—had 11 points, 8 rebounds, 12 assists, 2 steals, and 5 turnovers in a game. Magic also got credit for an "unsung hero" deed by diving after a loose ball (+1). Finally, he played a total of 33 minutes in this imaginary game.

The positive numbers (11 + 8 + 12 + 2 + 1) add up to 34. Then, we subtract the 5 turnovers (34–5) to get 29. Finally, we divide 29 by 33 minutes played.

$$29/33 = 0.879$$

Magic's CBE number here would be 879. This number was calculated for all of a player's games, and it was the average CBE that a player was asked to improve by 1 percent over the season. Riley compared each player's current CBE to not only their past performances but also those of other players in the league. As Riley put it, "We rank team members alongside league opponents who play the same position and have similar role definitions."

Sportswriter Jackie MacMullan noted, "Riley trumpeted the top performers in the league in bold lettering on the blackboard each week and measured them against the corresponding players on his own roster. Solid, reliable players generally rated a score in the 600s, while elite players scored at least 800. Magic Johnson, who submitted 138 triple-doubles in his career, often scored over 1,000."

The Lakers also emphasized year-over-year progress by making historical comparisons of CBE data. Riley said, "We stacked the month of November 1986, next to November 1985, and showed the players whether they were doing better or worse than at the same point last season. Then we showed them how their performance figures for December 1986, stacked up against November's."

The Lakers rolled out CBE in October 1986. Eight months later, they were NBA champions. The following year, Pat Riley led his team to another title as the Lakers became the first team in twenty years to win back-to-back NBA championships. Afterward, he said, “Sustaining an effort is the most important thing for any enterprise. The way to be successful is to learn how to do things right, then do them the same way every time.”

The CBE program is a prime example of the power of reflection and review. The Lakers were already talented. CBE helped them get the most out of what they had, and made sure their habits improved rather than declined.

Reflection and review enables the long-term improvement of all habits because it makes you aware of your mistakes and helps you consider possible paths for improvement. Without reflection, we can make excuses, create rationalizations, and lie to ourselves. We have no process for determining whether we are performing better or worse compared to yesterday.

Top performers in all fields engage in various types of reflection and review, and the process doesn’t have to be complex. Kenyan runner Eliud Kipchoge is one of the greatest marathoners of all time and an Olympic gold medalist. He still takes notes after every practice in which he reviews his training for the day and searches for areas that can be improved. Similarly, gold medal swimmer Katie Ledecky records her wellness on a scale of 1 to 10 and includes notes on her nutrition and how well she slept. She also records the times posted by other swimmers. At the end of each week, her coach goes over her notes and adds his thoughts.

It’s not just athletes, either. When comedian Chris Rock is preparing fresh material, he will first appear at small nightclubs dozens of times and test hundreds of jokes. He brings a notepad on stage and records which bits go over well and where he needs to make adjustments. The few

killer lines that survive will form the backbone of his new show.

I know of executives and investors who keep a “decision journal” in which they record the major decisions they make each week, why they made them, and what they expect the outcome to be. They review their choices at the end of each month or year to see where they were correct and where they went wrong.*

Improvement is not just about learning habits, it’s also about fine-tuning them. Reflection and review ensures that you spend your time on the right things and make course corrections whenever necessary—like Pat Riley adjusting the effort of his players on a nightly basis. You don’t want to keep practicing a habit if it becomes ineffective.

Personally, I employ two primary modes of reflection and review. Each December, I perform an *Annual Review*, in which I reflect on the previous year. I tally my habits for the year by counting up how many articles I published, how many workouts I put in, how many new places I visited, and more.* Then, I reflect on my progress (or lack thereof) by answering three questions:

1. What went well this year?
2. What didn’t go so well this year?
3. What did I learn?

Six months later, when summer rolls around, I conduct an *Integrity Report*. Like everyone, I make a lot of mistakes. My Integrity Report helps me realize where I went wrong and motivates me to get back on course. I use it as a time to revisit my core values and consider whether I have been living in accordance with them. This is when I reflect on my identity and how I can work toward being the type of person I wish to become.*

My yearly Integrity Report answers three questions:

1. What are the core values that drive my life and work?
2. How am I living and working with integrity right now?
3. How can I set a higher standard in the future?

These two reports don't take very long—just a few hours per year—but they are crucial periods of refinement. They prevent the gradual slide that happens when I don't pay close attention. They provide an annual reminder to revisit my desired identity and consider how my habits are helping me become the type of person I wish to be. They indicate when I should upgrade my habits and take on new challenges and when I should dial my efforts back and focus on the fundamentals.

Reflection can also bring a sense of perspective. Daily habits are powerful because of how they compound, but worrying too much about every daily choice is like looking at yourself in the mirror from an inch away. You can see every imperfection and lose sight of the bigger picture. There is too much feedback. Conversely, never reviewing your habits is like never looking in the mirror. You aren't aware of easily fixable flaws—a spot on your shirt, a bit of food in your teeth. There is too little feedback. Periodic reflection and review is like viewing yourself in the mirror from a conversational distance. You can see the important changes you should make without losing sight of the bigger picture. You want to view the entire mountain range, not obsess over each peak and valley.

Finally, reflection and review offers an ideal time to revisit one of the most important aspects of behavior change: identity.

HOW TO BREAK THE BELIEFS THAT HOLD YOU BACK

In the beginning, repeating a habit is essential to build up evidence of your desired identity. As you latch on to that

new identity, however, those same beliefs can hold you back from the next level of growth. When working against you, your identity creates a kind of “pride” that encourages you to deny your weak spots and prevents you from truly growing. This is one of the greatest downsides of building habits.

The more sacred an idea is to us—that is, the more deeply it is tied to our identity—the more strongly we will defend it against criticism. You see this in every industry. The schoolteacher who ignores innovative teaching methods and sticks with her tried-and-true lesson plans. The veteran manager who is committed to doing things “his way.” The surgeon who dismisses the ideas of her younger colleagues. The band who produces a mind-blowing first album and then gets stuck in a rut. The tighter we cling to an identity, the harder it becomes to grow beyond it.

One solution is to avoid making any single aspect of your identity an overwhelming portion of who you are. In the words of investor Paul Graham, “keep your identity small.” The more you let a single belief define you, the less capable you are of adapting when life challenges you. If you tie everything up in being the point guard or the partner at the firm or whatever else, then the loss of that facet of your life will wreck you. If you’re a vegan and then develop a health condition that forces you to change your diet, you’ll have an identity crisis on your hands. When you cling too tightly to one identity, you become brittle. Lose that one thing and you lose yourself.

For most of my young life, being an athlete was a major part of my identity. After my baseball career ended, I struggled to find myself. When you spend your whole life defining yourself in one way and that disappears, who are you now?

Military veterans and former entrepreneurs report similar feelings. If your identity is wrapped up in a belief like “I’m a great soldier,” what happens when your period

of service ends? For many business owners, their identity is something along the lines of “I’m the CEO” or “I’m the founder.” If you have spent every waking moment working on your business, how will you feel after you sell the company?

The key to mitigating these losses of identity is to redefine yourself such that you get to keep important aspects of your identity even if your particular role changes.

- “I’m an athlete” becomes “I’m the type of person who is mentally tough and loves a physical challenge.”
- “I’m a great soldier” transforms into “I’m the type of person who is disciplined, reliable, and great on a team.”
- “I’m the CEO” translates to “I’m the type of person who builds and creates things.”

When chosen effectively, an identity can be flexible rather than brittle. Like water flowing around an obstacle, your identity works with the changing circumstances rather than against them.

The following quote from the *Tao Te Ching* encapsulates the ideas perfectly:

Men are born soft and supple;
dead, they are stiff and hard.
Plants are born tender and pliant;
dead, they are brittle and dry.
Thus whoever is stiff and inflexible
is a disciple of death.
Whoever is soft and yielding
is a disciple of life.
The hard and stiff will be broken.
The soft and supple will prevail.

—Lao Tzu

Habits deliver numerous benefits, but the downside is that they can lock us into our previous patterns of thinking and acting—even when the world is shifting around us. Everything is impermanent. Life is constantly changing, so you need to periodically check in to see if your old habits and beliefs are still serving you.

A lack of self-awareness is poison. Reflection and review is the antidote.

Chapter Summary

- The upside of habits is that we can do things without thinking. The downside is that we stop paying attention to little errors.
- Habits + Deliberate Practice = Mastery
- Reflection and review is a process that allows you to remain conscious of your performance over time.
- The tighter we cling to an identity, the harder it becomes to grow beyond it.