

12

The Law of Least Effort

IN HIS AWARD-WINNING BOOK, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, anthropologist and biologist Jared Diamond points out a simple fact: different continents have different shapes. At first glance, this statement seems rather obvious and unimportant, but it turns out to have a profound impact on human behavior.

The primary axis of the Americas runs from north to south. That is, the landmass of North and South America tends to be tall and thin rather than wide and fat. The same is generally true for Africa. Meanwhile, the landmass that makes up Europe, Asia, and the Middle East is the opposite. This massive stretch of land tends to be more east-west in shape. According to Diamond, this difference in shape played a significant role in the spread of agriculture over the centuries.

When agriculture began to spread around the globe, farmers had an easier time expanding along east-west routes than along north-south ones. This is because locations along the same latitude generally share similar climates, amounts of sunlight and rainfall, and changes in season. These factors allowed farmers in Europe and Asia to domesticate a few crops and grow them along the entire stretch of land from France to China.

THE SHAPE OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR

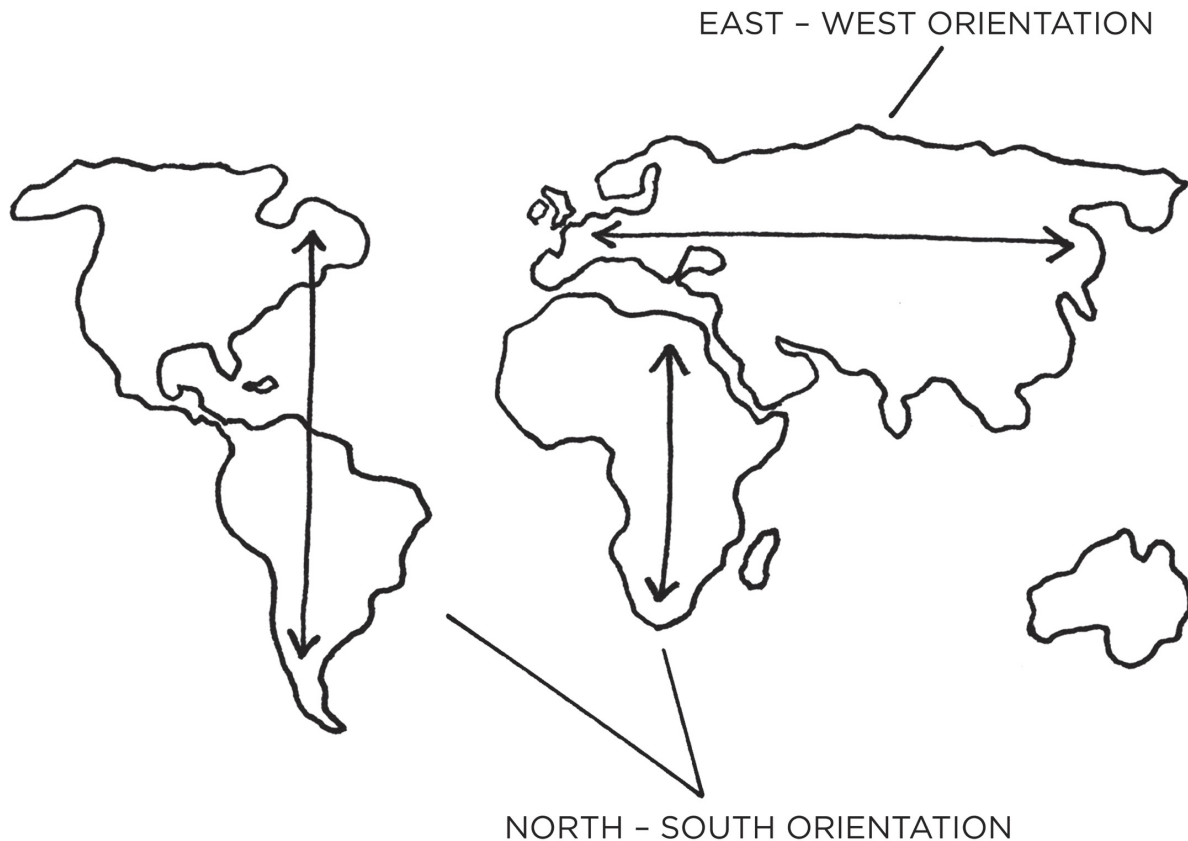


FIGURE 13: The primary axis of Europe and Asia is east-west. The primary axis of the Americas and Africa is north-south. This leads to a wider range of climates up-and-down the Americas than across Europe and Asia. As a result, agriculture spread nearly twice as fast across Europe and Asia than it did elsewhere. The behavior of farmers—even across hundreds or thousands of years—was constrained by the amount of friction in the environment.

By comparison, the climate varies greatly when traveling from north to south. Just imagine how different the weather is in Florida compared to Canada. You can be the most talented farmer in the world, but it won't help you grow Florida oranges in the Canadian winter. Snow is a poor substitute for soil. In order to spread crops along north-

south routes, farmers would need to find and domesticate new plants whenever the climate changed.

As a result, agriculture spread two to three times faster across Asia and Europe than it did up and down the Americas. Over the span of centuries, this small difference had a very big impact. Increased food production allowed for more rapid population growth. With more people, these cultures were able to build stronger armies and were better equipped to develop new technologies. The changes started out small—a crop that spread slightly farther, a population that grew slightly faster—but compounded into substantial differences over time.

The spread of agriculture provides an example of the 3rd Law of Behavior Change on a global scale. Conventional wisdom holds that motivation is the key to habit change. Maybe if you *really* wanted it, you'd actually do it. But the truth is, our real motivation is to be lazy and to do what is convenient. And despite what the latest productivity best seller will tell you, this is a smart strategy, not a dumb one.

Energy is precious, and the brain is wired to conserve it whenever possible. It is human nature to follow the Law of Least Effort, which states that when deciding between two similar options, people will naturally gravitate toward the option that requires the least amount of work.* For example, expanding your farm to the east where you can grow the same crops rather than heading north where the climate is different. Out of all the possible actions we could take, the one that is realized is the one that delivers the most value for the least effort. We are motivated to do what is easy.

Every action requires a certain amount of energy. The more energy required, the less likely it is to occur. If your goal is to do a hundred push-ups per day, that's a lot of energy! In the beginning, when you're motivated and excited, you can muster the strength to get started. But after a few days, such a massive effort feels exhausting.

Meanwhile, sticking to the habit of doing one push-up per day requires almost no energy to get started. And the less energy a habit requires, the more likely it is to occur.

Look at any behavior that fills up much of your life and you'll see that it can be performed with very low levels of motivation. Habits like scrolling on our phones, checking email, and watching television steal so much of our time because they can be performed almost without effort. They are remarkably convenient.

In a sense, every habit is just an obstacle to getting what you really want. Dieting is an obstacle to getting fit. Meditation is an obstacle to feeling calm. Journaling is an obstacle to thinking clearly. You don't actually want the habit itself. What you really want is the outcome the habit delivers. The greater the obstacle—that is, the more difficult the habit—the more friction there is between you and your desired end state. This is why it is crucial to make your habits so easy that you'll do them even when you don't feel like it. If you can make your good habits more convenient, you'll be more likely to follow through on them.

But what about all the moments when we seem to do the opposite? If we're all so lazy, then how do you explain people accomplishing hard things like raising a child or starting a business or climbing Mount Everest?

Certainly, you are capable of doing very hard things. The problem is that some days you feel like doing the hard work and some days you feel like giving in. On the tough days, it's crucial to have as many things working in your favor as possible so that you can overcome the challenges life naturally throws your way. The less friction you face, the easier it is for your stronger self to emerge. The idea behind *make it easy* is not to *only* do easy things. The idea is to make it as easy as possible in the moment to do things that payoff in the long run.

HOW TO ACHIEVE MORE WITH LESS EFFORT

Imagine you are holding a garden hose that is bent in the middle. Some water can flow through, but not very much. If you want to increase the rate at which water passes through the hose, you have two options. The first option is to crank up the valve and force more water out. The second option is to simply remove the bend in the hose and let water flow through naturally.

Trying to pump up your motivation to stick with a hard habit is like trying to force water through a bent hose. You can do it, but it requires a lot of effort and increases the tension in your life. Meanwhile, making your habits simple and easy is like removing the bend in the hose. Rather than trying to overcome the friction in your life, you reduce it.

One of the most effective ways to reduce the friction associated with your habits is to practice environment design. In Chapter 6, we discussed environment design as a method for making cues more obvious, but you can also optimize your environment to make actions easier. For example, when deciding where to practice a new habit, it is best to choose a place that is already along the path of your daily routine. Habits are easier to build when they fit into the flow of your life. You are more likely to go to the gym if it is on your way to work because stopping doesn't add much friction to your lifestyle. By comparison, if the gym is off the path of your normal commute—even by just a few blocks—now you're going "out of your way" to get there.

Perhaps even more effective is reducing the friction within your home or office. Too often, we try to start habits in high-friction environments. We try to follow a strict diet while we are out to dinner with friends. We try to write a book in a chaotic household. We try to concentrate while using a smartphone filled with distractions. It doesn't have to be this way. We can remove the points of friction that

hold us back. This is precisely what electronics manufacturers in Japan began to do in the 1970s.

In an article published in the *New Yorker* titled “Better All the Time,” James Surowiecki writes:

“Japanese firms emphasized what came to be known as ‘lean production,’ relentlessly looking to remove waste of all kinds from the production process, down to redesigning workspaces, so workers didn’t have to waste time twisting and turning to reach their tools. The result was that Japanese factories were more efficient and Japanese products were more reliable than American ones. In 1974, service calls for American-made color televisions were five times as common as for Japanese televisions. By 1979, it took American workers three times as long to assemble their sets.”

I like to refer to this strategy as *addition by subtraction*.^{[*](#)} The Japanese companies looked for every point of friction in the manufacturing process and eliminated it. As they subtracted wasted effort, they added customers and revenue. Similarly, when we remove the points of friction that sap our time and energy, we can achieve more with less effort. (This is one reason tidying up can feel so good: we are simultaneously moving forward and lightening the cognitive load our environment places on us.)

If you look at the most habit-forming products, you’ll notice that one of the things these goods and services do best is remove little bits of friction from your life. Meal delivery services reduce the friction of shopping for groceries. Dating apps reduce the friction of making social introductions. Ride-sharing services reduce the friction of getting across town. Text messaging reduces the friction of sending a letter in the mail.

Like a Japanese television manufacturer redesigning their workspace to reduce wasted motion, successful companies design their products to automate, eliminate, or simplify as many steps as possible. They reduce the number

of fields on each form. They pare down the number of clicks required to create an account. They deliver their products with easy-to-understand directions or ask their customers to make fewer choices.

When the first voice-activated speakers were released—products like Google Home, Amazon Echo, and Apple HomePod—I asked a friend what he liked about the product he had purchased. He said it was just easier to say “Play some country music” than to pull out his phone, open the music app, and pick a playlist. Of course, just a few years earlier, having unlimited access to music in your pocket was a remarkably frictionless behavior compared to driving to the store and buying a CD. Business is a never-ending quest to deliver the same result in an easier fashion.

Similar strategies have been used effectively by governments. When the British government wanted to increase tax collection rates, they switched from sending citizens to a web page where the tax form could be downloaded to linking directly to the form. Reducing that one step in the process increased the response rate from 19.2 percent to 23.4 percent. For a country like the United Kingdom, those percentage points represent millions in tax revenue.

The central idea is to create an environment where doing the right thing is as easy as possible. Much of the battle of building better habits comes down to finding ways to reduce the friction associated with our good habits and increase the friction associated with our bad ones.

PRIME THE ENVIRONMENT FOR FUTURE USE

Oswald Nuckols is an IT developer from Natchez, Mississippi. He is also someone who understands the power of priming his environment.

Nuckols dialed in his cleaning habits by following a strategy he refers to as “resetting the room.” For instance, when he finishes watching television, he places the remote back on the TV stand, arranges the pillows on the couch, and folds the blanket. When he leaves his car, he throws any trash away. Whenever he takes a shower, he wipes down the toilet while the shower is warming up. (As he notes, the “perfect time to clean the toilet is right before you wash yourself in the shower anyway.”) The purpose of resetting each room is not simply to clean up after the last action, but to prepare for the next action.

“When I walk into a room everything is in its right place,” Nuckols wrote. “Because I do this every day in every room, stuff always stays in good shape. . . . People think I work hard but I’m actually really lazy. I’m just proactively lazy. It gives you so much time back.”

Whenever you organize a space for its intended purpose, you are priming it to make the next action easy. For instance, my wife keeps a box of greeting cards that are presorted by occasion—birthday, sympathy, wedding, graduation, and more. Whenever necessary, she grabs an appropriate card and sends it off. She is incredibly good at remembering to send cards because she has reduced the friction of doing so. For years, I was the opposite. Someone would have a baby and I would think, “I should send a card.” But then weeks would pass and by the time I remembered to pick one up at the store, it was too late. The habit wasn’t easy.

There are many ways to prime your environment so it’s ready for immediate use. If you want to cook a healthy breakfast, place the skillet on the stove, set the cooking spray on the counter, and lay out any plates and utensils you’ll need the night before. When you wake up, making breakfast will be easy.

- Want to draw more? Put your pencils, pens, notebooks, and drawing tools on top of your desk, within easy reach.
- Want to exercise? Set out your workout clothes, shoes, gym bag, and water bottle ahead of time.
- Want to improve your diet? Chop up a ton of fruits and vegetables on weekends and pack them in containers, so you have easy access to healthy, ready-to-eat options during the week.

These are simple ways to make the good habit the path of least resistance.

You can also invert this principle and prime the environment to make bad behaviors difficult. If you find yourself watching too much television, for example, then unplug it after each use. Only plug it back in if you can say out loud the name of the show you want to watch. This setup creates just enough friction to prevent mindless viewing.

If that doesn't do it, you can take it a step further. Unplug the television and take the batteries out of the remote after each use, so it takes an extra ten seconds to turn it back on. And if you're really hard-core, move the television out of the living room and into a closet after each use. You can be sure you'll only take it out when you *really* want to watch something. The greater the friction, the less likely the habit.

Whenever possible, I leave my phone in a different room until lunch. When it's right next to me, I'll check it all morning for no reason at all. But when it is in another room, I rarely think about it. And the friction is high enough that I won't go get it without a reason. As a result, I get three to four hours each morning when I can work without interruption.

If sticking your phone in another room doesn't seem like enough, tell a friend or family member to hide it from you for a few hours. Ask a coworker to keep it at their desk in the morning and give it back to you at lunch.

It is remarkable how little friction is required to prevent unwanted behavior. When I hide beer in the back of the fridge where I can't see it, I drink less. When I delete social media apps from my phone, it can be weeks before I download them again and log in. These tricks are unlikely to curb a true addiction, but for many of us, a little bit of friction can be the difference between sticking with a good habit or sliding into a bad one. Imagine the cumulative impact of making dozens of these changes and living in an environment designed to make the good behaviors easier and the bad behaviors harder.

Whether we are approaching behavior change as an individual, a parent, a coach, or a leader, we should ask ourselves the same question: "How can we design a world where it's easy to do what's right?" Redesign your life so the actions that matter most are also the actions that are easiest to do.

Chapter Summary

- Human behavior follows the Law of Least Effort. We will naturally gravitate toward the option that requires the least amount of work.
- Create an environment where doing the right thing is as easy as possible.
- Reduce the friction associated with good behaviors. When friction is low, habits are easy.
- Increase the friction associated with bad behaviors. When friction is high, habits are difficult.
- Prime your environment to make future actions easier.