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ARTICLE **MOTIVATING PEOPLE**

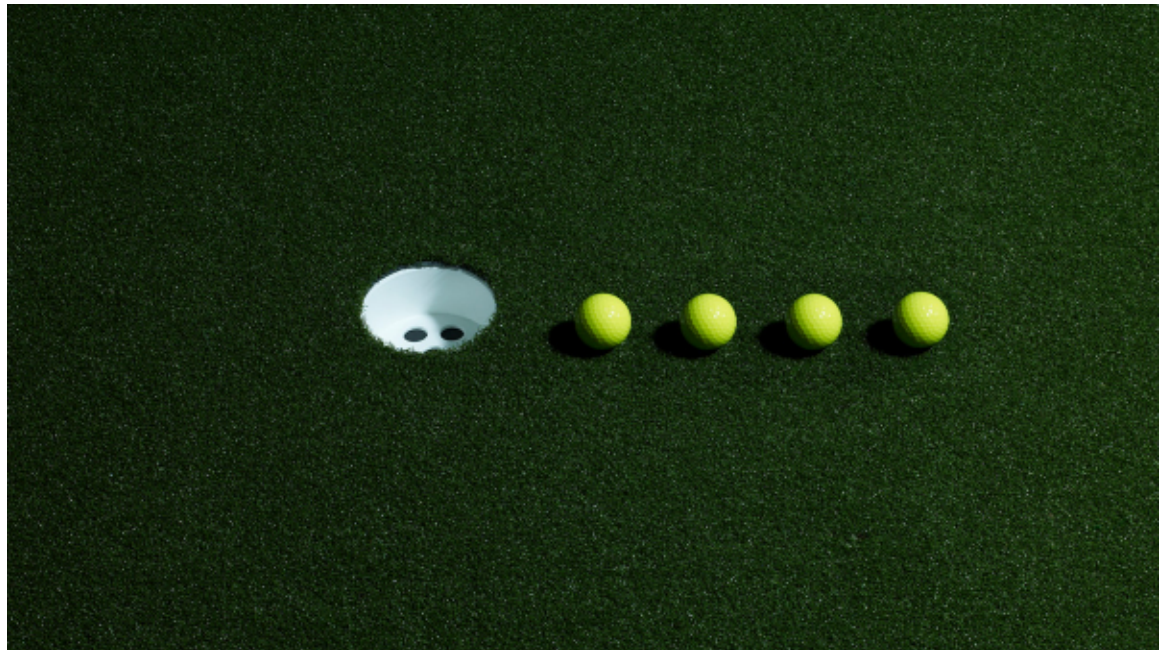
To Achieve Big Goals, Start with Small Habits

by Sabina Nawaz

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FLASHPOP/GETTY IMAGES

The six faces around the table displayed expressions not usually seen in a corporate room. They ranged from sheepish to flustered to outright embarrassed. These were the successful, ambitious participants in a peer coaching group, and they'd been nominated to attend a leadership program by their bosses. Their uncharacteristic appearance was because of a just-completed assessment that said most of them were in a full-blown crisis trying to manage their time and energy.

Humbled by the results, their immediate task was to identify a small change of habit to improve their situation. Like participants in dozens of prior coaching groups I've facilitated, these high-potential,

high-achieving, and highly stressed professionals first sketched out ambitious plans: the man who never exercised vowed to visit the gym for a minimum of 30 minutes daily; the woman who was plugged into email until midnight now planned an hour of pleasure reading before bedtime; the man just finishing his second dessert was swearing off sugar entirely.

We've all been there. When presented with a problem that requires behavior change, we pounce on it with big goals — only to find ourselves locked into a self-defeating cycle. As high achievers, we're programmed to "go big or go home" and to "set big hairy audacious goals." Big goals are more burdensome than they are motivational; they require daunting effort to accomplish and [sustain in our busy lives](#). Falling short of a lofty goal creates a negative spiral of discouragement deterring future action. Instead of striding forward, we slide backward.

It's great to dream big, but the way to *achieve* big is to start small — through micro habits. Micro habits are small components of a larger habit. By breaking down an ambitious job into smaller, more achievable ones that you build over long periods of time, micro habits help you complete big goals. For example, when I first started running, my micro habit was to lay out my gym clothes the night before and get into them first thing in the morning. When I eventually made it to the gym, my next micro habit was to simply walk on the treadmill for 10 minutes each day. Two years later, I ran my first 10K race — something I'd been trying to do unsuccessfully for a couple of decades. Formidable objectives suddenly become achievable.

The idea of making change through small habits isn't new; others have [discussed](#) and [written](#) about it in the past. But people still struggle to implement them. We're indoctrinated to — and rewarded for — thinking big, not executing small. We might feel silly doing something minuscule and spending any time on it might not seem worthwhile, so we talk ourselves out of doing them at the start.

Even incorporating a tiny shift into our routines is harder than we might imagine. The reality about big behavioral changes is that it's unlikely you'll make a dramatic shift overnight — otherwise you would have done it long ago. But we often underestimate our resistance to smaller adjustments as well. Any changes to our routine and ingrained behavior is difficult.

To succeed with micro habits, you must be deliberate and choreograph steps to sustain them. With that in mind, consider these five steps for getting started:

Identify a “ridiculously small” micro habit.

It usually takes my workshop participants between three and eight tries before they come up with something sufficiently small enough to be considered a micro habit. When I tell them reading for an hour each night is too large, they then change to reading for 45 minutes, then 30 minutes, and so on. Finally, I tell them, “You will know you've truly reached the level of a micro habit, when you say, ‘That's so ridiculously small, it's not worth doing’” — in this case reading only one paragraph each night. In our coaching groups, participants only get credit for achieving the minimum bar, not going beyond it. Aim for small.

Piggyback on a daily task.

The benefit of micro habits is that you should be able to perform it with minimal effort every day. It's important to [execute on a new ritual daily](#) so it becomes second nature, and if it's small enough, you won't be as tempted to defer your task from one day to the next. However, no matter the size of the task, it's easy to get distracted, make excuses, or forget. Perform your new action at the same time as (or right before) an action you do without thinking. Need to read a paragraph each night? You can do that while brushing your teeth. Meditating for 30 seconds each day? Check that off your list while waiting for your coffee to brew.

Track your progress.

As the saying goes, "What gets measured, gets done." Again, if your measurement process is elaborate, you're less likely to complete it. Many of my coaching clients use a [Yes List](#) requiring 20 seconds a day to complete. Write down the desired action and under each date, simply list a Y or N to indicate if you completed the task. People discover [surprising benefits](#) to the Yes List, including detecting patterns when they're likely to advance or regress in their efforts.

Hold steady for a long time.

It's hard to think small to begin with; it's even harder to stay small. Jake's micro habit was doing two push-ups a day. After earning 10 Y's in a row on his Yes List, Jake was eager to do more. For the next two days he did five push-ups, soon pushing up the number to 10 and then adding a 20-minute workout after. The sad result? Within two months, Jake had given up exercising as he'd enlarged his goals unrealistically fast. You've stuck with your original micro habit long enough when you feel bored with it for at least two weeks in a row. Then increase it only by about 10%.

Seek help in holding you accountable.

It might sound strange to enlist a partner to monitor your daily reading of one paragraph or doing two push-ups. But having people support you and hold you accountable can cement new behaviors, and it helps them in return. The leadership program mentioned above has a peer group meeting every other week, and participants send a report of their micro habits weekly, updating the group on progress by stating how many days of the week they performed it. When someone consistently fails to act on their micro habit, the group helps them further refine the task or address possible hindrances to action. If you don't have a peer coaching group, consider asking three to six friends who are also interested in making a change if they'd be willing to exchange Yes Lists every week. Make sure you curate a small group rather than just one person. This creates a stronger bond of accountability in case one person peters out. The simple act of accounting for not achieving your micro goal can be a motivator — even if it means completing that day's task right before you communicate.

When you want to change behavior, jumping headlong into a major goal with both feet is often a waste of time. Instead, make tiny, incremental adjustments until they are part of your muscle memory. By starting small, you can attain big results.

Sabina Nawaz is a [global CEO coach](#), leadership keynote speaker, and writer working in over 26 countries. She advises C-level executives in Fortune 500 corporations, government agencies, non-profits, and academic organizations. Sabina has spoken at hundreds of seminars, events, and conferences including [TEDx](#) and has written for [FastCompany.com](#), [Inc.com](#), and [Forbes.com](#), in addition to HBR.org. Follow her on [Twitter](#).
