Atomic Habits and Incremental Improvement

For personal development, prevailing wisdom seems to be that rather than setting big lofty goals for ourselves, we should make small incremental improvements and commit to small behavioral changes that we can develop into healthy habits.

Set Priorities

Ryan Holiday suggests (mirror/archive) that we prioritise the things that we think are most important and get them done early in the day whilst our energy reserves are full. He gives some celebrity anecdotes about this point for Hugh Jackman and Camilla Cabello.

Avoid Shiny Outcome Syndrome

Shiny Outcome Syndrome is what happens when you focus on outcomes and outputs generated by yourself and others rather than focusing on what is actionable right now. The term appears to have been coined by Justin Welsh who talks about it (mirror/archive) in his Saturday Solopreneur newsletter. However, it also fits with stuff that many other productivity gurus have written about.

In this blog post (mirror/archive), Kurtis Pykes calls this concept "the positive fantasy trap" - time spent fantasising about positive outcomes of a change you haven't yet made activates the reward centre of your brain so you are less motivated to actually do the thing. Alternatively, this view might make the outcome seem impossible and the task insurmountable.

Ryan Holiday writes about (mirror/archive) James Clear's Atomic Habits:

> ...repetitive actions accumulate and add up in a big way over time. Don't promise yourself you're going to read more; instead, commit to reading one page per day.
>
> Thinking big is great, but thinking small is easier. And easier is what we're after when it comes to getting started. Because once you get started, you can build.

The 5 Whys

Use the 5 whys to really drill into why you want to achieve something as recommended by Kurtis Pykes (mirror/archive):

> It's pretty simple; ask yourself why you want what you want, answer, and repeat the process four more times.
>
> For instance, take the following scenario:
>
> > **Why #1:** Why do you want to be one of the best professional footballers playing in a top-four club that competes for titles in England and Europe? **Response #1:** I have a chip on my shoulder. I want to prove people who doubted me wrong.
> >
> > **Why #2:** Why do you want to prove yourself to people who doubted you wrong?**Response #2:** So, in the future, people do not give up on me.
> >
> > **Why #3:** Why don't you want people to give up on you? **Response #3:** It kills my confidence
> >
> > **Why #4:** Why does it kill your confidence? **Response #4:** Because I'm very attuned to what people think of me.
> >
> > **Why #5**: Why are you very attuned to what people think of you? **Response #5**: I have low-self esteem, and it hurts me when I feel like I'm letting others down.
>
> **Boom!**

Be Selective about Opportunities - Don't Be Afraid to Say 'No'

Something I learned pretty early in my career: you need to be open to opportunities and as a young upstart you might think you [illegible] you're starting out you do need to be more open to new oppo[illegible]ore about who you are and what you are interested in and also[illegible]ou establish yourself and your interests, it is important that y[illegible]at you have enough time to focus on the things you want to do.



The movie Yes Man perfectly illustrates this conundrum: Jim Carrey's character goes from being a boring guy who doesn't do anything to "yes man" - someone who always says yes to new opportunities, no matter what. This allows him to cultivate new friendship groups and a romantic relationship but he eventually has to learn the hard way that that sometimes saying yes can detract from the things you enjoy.

Ryan Holiday writes about saying no (mirror/archive), suggesting to keep reminders to say "No" around when making decisions in order to help you to weigh up whether or not to accept every new opportunity.

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