HOW HABITS WORK
THE SCHOOL LEADER’S GUIDE TO
MASTERING HABIT FLOW

THE PRINCIPAL CENTER
I recently developed a daily habit of exercising, which was great for my health as well as my sense of self-efficacy. I kept it up for more than a month, logging five or more days of moderate to intense exercise a week.

Then, I hit the road.

For about six weeks, I was on a series of business trips of varying length, home for a while, then gone again, with very little consistency. At first, I diligently did my workout videos in my hotel room or (ideally) the fitness center. But as the weeks of bleary-eyed travel wore on, my habits started to erode. I’d arrive home at 1am after all day in the air or in the car, and I simply wasn’t going to fit in a workout.

Here’s a graph of my weekly progress from Coach.me:

Can you tell when I hit the road?

Today, I’m moving closer to daily exercise, though I’m not there yet (this week is the orange column). As you can see, rebuilding this habit has been slow going—I’ll continue the story on p. 3.

And yet, this entire time, I was able to maintain my daily “Inbox Zero” habit, which requires that I process every single email in my inbox, once per day (I explain how to do this in our Network program The Inbox Overhaul). At times, I had to choose between doing email and working out, and I chose email. At other times, exercise simply wasn’t feasible.

And just this week, I got my to-do list caught up, so it’s not full of out-of-date projects, or missing critical tasks that I know I need to complete. I’m striving to make this a long-term daily habit, just like Inbox Zero.

Over time, your habits will improve, decline, get jump-started, get interrupted, and get completely replaced with other habits. It happens naturally, and it happens to all of us.

But as a high-performance instructional leader, you don’t have to be a passive participant in this process. You can take control of your habit flow, and make sure that the habits that define your life and work are the ones that will produce the results you care about.

In this Leadership Guide, we’ll explore why habits matter, and how you can change bad habits into better habits. It’s my hope that you’ll identify specific ways to increase your impact on student learning by developing high-performance habits for your life and work.

Sincerely,

Justin Baeder
Heber Springs, AR

Tools for managing your habit flow

Coach.me (website & mobile app)
For tracking habits

ToDoist (website & mobile app)
For managing tasks and projects

Future File
For keeping your desk clear

FollowUpThen.com
For keeping your inbox empty by “snoozing” emails, similar to Future File
Doing any kind of work “manually” will produce inferior results in comparison to more systematic approaches.

That’s part of our core philosophy in the High-Performance Instructional Leadership Network. Consider these examples of systematic and non-systematic approaches:

- Having processes and procedures in place, rather than expecting staff to come to us for a decision about every situation
- Approaching each day with a clear plan for how we’ll spend our time and what we’ll strive to accomplish, rather than bouncing helplessly from one meeting to another and putting out fires in between
- Using low- and high-tech tools to put as much of our work as possible on autopilot—or at least accelerate it—rather than persisting in time-wasting traditional approaches.

And yet, using habits to accomplish our core work is fairly rare in our profession, except as we develop them by default over time. We’ll form habits naturally with experience, but the pressures of the principalship don’t foster the most productive habits. Instead, they foster reactivity and fragmentation.

Being an administrator conditions us to:

- Expect to be interrupted
- Respond to every emergency, and
- See ourselves as victims of circumstance rather than purposeful decision-makers.

We certainly need to be aware of and responsive to emerging situations in our schools—there’s no escaping the immediacy of work as intensely human as school leadership.

But we mustn’t lose sight of the possibilities for improvement.

To be sure, we won’t make substantial improvements by simply working harder or putting in longer hours. But we can achieve significantly higher performance as instructional leaders by focusing on how we manage our habits.

Why Habits Need To Be Managed

We devote a great deal of effort to managing and leading others, but we often forget to manage ourselves. “I’m doing the best I can,” I tell myself.

The key isn’t to beat yourself up when you fall short of your aspirations. The key is to adjust your habits.

We know this intuitively at certain times of year. “I’m going to have to watch what I eat over the holidays. I need to make sure I get some exercise during the winter months. I want to read a dozen books over the summer.” We manage our habits to prepare for—or take advantage of—the various seasons of the year and the opportunities and challenges they present.

But we can do the same for the varying “seasons” of our work and lives. For example, as I shared on p. 2, I recently got into a daily habit of exercising, no matter how busy my day became. I was extremely proud of this habit, but when travel disrupted my routines, the habit withered.

Habits need to be actively managed, because they don’t just reactivate themselves automatically. Let me tell you the rest of the story.

When I got home, I figured I’d get back into my daily exercise routine. But then I got sick. It wasn’t terrible, but I was coughing, sneezing, and had a fever. For a few days, it was impossible to exercise—I barely got out of bed one day. But I didn’t exercise much at all for a full month, due to the travel, a lingering cough, and the loss of the momentum I’d been relying on.

My momentum had become inertia, so the most natural choice was to continue not exercising. But I knew how important it was that I get back into the habit, so I forced myself to put on my workout clothes, pop in the DVD, and struggle through at least half of the workout. Day 1 wasn’t anything to brag about, but it broke the pattern—the habit—of not exercising, and started me on a path to re-activating the habit of breaking a sweat every day.
Looking back, I realize that a small change could have helped me stay in the groove without jeopardizing my health: I could have scaled back my exercise—a short walk on the treadmill, or a trip to the park with my kids—and maintained the habit, rather than abandoning it.

Every habit we form will face an interruption of some kind. We can’t always keep up our habits perfectly when we encounter these challenges. But we can choose to manage our habits, remembering that they determine our effectiveness and our impact.

If It’s Worth Doing, It’s Worth Doing Every Day

I’m convinced that the most effective habits are those we turn into daily commitments. Not only will we have more opportunities to make a difference when we keep up daily—it’s much easier to answer today’s emails than today’s PLUS yesterday’s—but we’ll also have an easier time maintaining our willpower.

In their book Willpower: Rediscovering The Greatest Human Strength, Roy Baumeister and John Tierney give us a glimpse of how habits ebb and flow by sharing insights from David Blaine, perhaps the world’s greatest endurance artist. Blaine has performed remarkable feats of fortitude, living for a week in a block of ice, 44 days in a box above the river Thames, and 16 hours on a spinning gyroscope.

As you might imagine, such feats require rigorous training and incredible self-discipline—at which Blaine excels. But when he’s not training for a stunt, Blaine allows his habits to fade away, and he acts like a mere mortal again—eating poorly, managing his time poorly, and generally acting like the rest of us. Baumeister and Tierney share this story to illustrate both that self-discipline isn’t so much a character trait as a behavior, and that self-discipline in one area carries over to self-discipline in others.

It’s worth reading the whole book, but the David Blaine case study reinforces the truth that if something is worth doing, it’s worth doing every day. Not only do we benefit from the momentum of keeping up a habit on a daily basis, but we also get far more practice. And the better we get at something, the easier it is to keep it up.

When Habits Fade Away

Sometimes we find that our habits disappear accidentally, without our even noticing. My laptop was recently in the shop for repairs, and I had to re-install all of my applications when I got it back. One that I decided not to install was Evernote, which is one of the core apps I recommend for managing information and making it searchable.

I reasoned that I could use Evernote’s web-based interface rather than the downloadable app, and indeed this worked well any time I needed to find information I’d previously saved. But a subtle shift had taken place in my habits: I was no longer saving new information to Evernote, because the app was out of sight and out of mind.

The slightly higher friction of going to Evernote’s website, instead of keeping the app open on my computer, had broken my habit. As a result, I was saving information to random places that didn’t work as well, and it became hard to find several things I’d recently written. When I realized what had happened, I installed the app and got back into my routine—an easy fix.

Think for a moment about a habit you’ve practiced in the past, but that has somehow slipped away. Use the space below to identify this habit and the key actions you need to take to put it back into practice.

Lapsed Habit Reactivation

1. A habit I’ve practiced in the past, but am not currently practicing, is:
   
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

2. What friction or interruption led you to stop practicing this habit?
   
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

3. What consequences have you experienced from allowing this habit to lapse?
   
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________

4. What are two actions you can take to re-activate this habit and address the “friction” you identified above?
   
   __________________________________________
   __________________________________________
In his excellent book The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business, Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Charles Duhigg describes the classical “habit loop” that drives our habitual behavior:

- A cue, whether internal or external, triggers a response
- This response, the sequence, gets executed with almost no thinking
- This results in a reward, which reinforces the habit by increasing our anticipation of the reward next time we repeat the sequence.

Duhigg portrays the habit loop as a cycle from cue to sequence to reward, and back to cue. But the relationships involved in habit formation, execution, and modification aren’t a simple loop. They’re more like a Rube Goldberg machine, those whimsically complex contraptions that use everything from bowling balls to candles to perform a simple action like turning on a lamp. We can de-mystify the process a bit by getting clear on exactly how habits work. Let’s look at each of the factors in turn.

The Cue
Cues can be internal or external, tangible and obvious, or subtle and invisible; virtually any type of stimulus can trigger a habit loop. Common cues include:

- Chronological clues such as the time of day or elapsed time
- Emotions such as anger or happiness
- Physical sensations such as hunger or fatigue
- Environmental cues such as temperature and lighting
- Tool-based cues such as alarms and reminders
- Interpersonal cues such as facial expressions, tone, or words
- Criterion-based cues such as standards, checklists, or rubrics
- Instrument-based cues, like the reading on a speedometer or gas gauge

Some cues are predictable—for example, the time of day—while others pop up at random times. The more predictable the cue, the easier it is to change the habits associated with it.

The Sequence
The sequence is the behavior at the heart of the habit—biting your nails, eating junk food, multitasking during phone calls—whatever you do without thinking when cued and rewarded. Initially, it takes conscious effort to carry out the steps in the sequence, but as the habit sets in, we develop automaticity with these steps, so we can perform them without thinking.

This automaticity is a double-edged sword: it allows us to accomplish more without exerting as much effort, but it also allows us to engage in unhelpful behavior patterns without thinking critically about what we’re doing.

The Reward
The reward is the driver of the whole process—without the reward, there’d be no reason to waste your time
on counterproductive behavior. But an enticing reward can make an irrational behavior—like allowing your desk to be permanently messy—seem more appealing than the more self-disciplined choice.

Within a habit loop, rewards are almost always feelings. These feelings may be emotional, mental, and even physical, but it’s important to understand that the term “reward” doesn’t refer to anything external or monetary. If a behavior seems to be driven by external rewards, we don’t have to do too much digging to figure out what feelings those external rewards trigger in us.

Examples of apparent and actual rewards include:

• Not the promotion itself, but the feeling of status it confers
• Not the snack itself, but the feeling of satiation it creates
• Not the empty inbox itself, but the feeling of self-efficacy it triggers

In Duhigg’s “habit loop” model, there are just three factors. But to really understand how habits work—and how we can change them effectively—we need a better model. We can start by adding a 4th component, which Duhigg describes in his text but doesn’t include in his visual model.

The Craving

The reward is the driver of the entire habit-reinforcement process, as we’ve seen. But the reward doesn’t usually trigger the cue—as we’ve seen, cues can be almost any type of stimulus. What does the reward lead to? Anticipation—or what Duhigg calls “the craving.” Duhigg cites fascinating research that shows that after receiving a cue they’ve been taught, rats’ brain activity spikes in anticipation, then spikes again with satisfaction when the reward is received. Remarkably, though, brain activity is lower during both the cue and sequence phases.

This explains why we can carry out habitual behaviors on “autopilot”—our brains are only consciously involved in getting excited about the reward, and experiencing the reward. The rest is nearly automatic.

When we understand how anticipation reinforces our habits, we gain powerful tools for change. Want to form a new habit? Tie it to a craving. Want to break a bad habit? Destroy your anticipation for its reward.

How can we revise our model to include the importance of anticipation? It might look something like this:

As you can see in this admittedly silly illustration, the cue triggers not the sequence, but the craving, and it’s this anticipation of the reward that sparks a near-automatic response. This response—the sequence—leads to the reward, which in turn “recharges” the sense of anticipation for the next time the habit is cued.

Duhigg says that the “golden rule of habit change” is to keep the same cue and reward, but change the sequence—for example, if you want to lose weight, you can’t stop feeling hungry (cue) and wanting to feel full (anticipation of reward). But you can eat a salad instead of a burger (response).

But is that the only way to shape our habits? Are we doomed to react to the same cues, and experience the same rewards, whether we want to or not? The revised “trampoline” model above gives us several answers.

First, if the reward is interrupted—if there’s no “bounce” to the trampoline—the sense of anticipation won’t be re-loaded. Consider how you might be excited the first time you visit a new restaurant, but won’t look forward to eating there again if your initial experience is sub-par. The reward is crucial for forming and maintaining the habit, because it’s what primes you to respond to the cue next time it occurs.

Second, notice that the cue stands off to the side, subject to any number of outside influences. We can shape these influences to shape our habits. Now that we have a clear model relating each component, we can identify specific points of leverage in creating, modifying, and eliminating habits.
#1. THE GOLDEN RULE: Keep The Cue & Reward... But Change The Sequence By Making A Personal Rule

In *The Power of Habit*, Duhigg suggests that changing habits is merely a matter of replacing one sequence—the middle part of the habit loop—with another, while keeping the same cue and reward. This “golden rule” of habit change works because for many unhelpful habits that we might want to change, the cue and reward are beyond our direct control, but our behavior isn’t.

Think of a college student who tends to go outside for a smoke when her parents start to argue. She knows she can’t prevent such arguments or eliminate her desire to calm her nerves. What she can do, though, is find another way to calm her nerves when the yelling begins. She can go for a walk, which will mimic some of the rewards—such as solitude and fresh air—of the behavior she’s trying to eliminate.

Think about a habit in your professional life that you’d like to change—perhaps you find yourself clicking through your inbox at random, picking out the easiest emails and saving the rest for some unidentified future time. You know it’s much more efficient to process your messages newest-to-oldest, so you’re ready to swap in a new behavior and discard the old pattern. All you have to do is make a personal rule in the format:

*If X happens, then I’ll do Y, in order to obtain Z.*

Whenever possible, I certainly recommend using this “golden rule” of habit change to your advantage. If you can replace a bad behavior with a good one, while retaining the same cue and reward, go for it. Create a simply-worded rule that leaves little room for interpretation, and stick to it.

But that’s often not enough. If the replacement behavior—the new sequence—doesn’t trigger exactly the same or better rewards, it’s unlikely to stick in times of stress. We’ll just revert to our older, more comforting ways.

The golden rule is based on the assumption that you can take a habit:

\[ X_1 \rightarrow Y_1 \rightarrow Z_1 \]

and change only the sequence, relying on the same cue and obtaining the same reward:

\[ X_1 \rightarrow Y_2 \rightarrow Z_1 \]

But this isn’t always possible. Sometimes we get a related but inferior reward (Z2), or we find that the original cue (X1) is hard to associate with the new behavior (Y2). Habits get encoded deeply and powerfully in our brains, so simply deciding to engage in a new behavior often isn’t enough. We need strategies for attacking all three parts of a destructive habit.

#2. DISRUPT THE ROUTINE: Interfere With The Sequence By Making It Impractical

Let’s start by identifying the cue, sequence, and reward. The cue (X) is probably seeing your inbox—either when you sit down at your computer and find that you’ve left it open, or when you purposefully launch your email app. The sequence (Y)? Cherry-picking emails that look interesting, instead of processing them newest-to-oldest.

But what about Z, the reward? Perhaps it’s the feeling of calm you get by avoiding the unpleasant messages. Perhaps it conserves your mental energy to put off making so many decisions. Could you achieve these same rewards AND get your inbox empty? Yes, I believe you can (see my guide *How To Handle Every Kind of Email for Maximum Productivity* to learn more).

One trick I share in the 21-Day Instructional Leadership Challenge is to deputize your secretary to physically remove your chair from your office. If it’s time to be in classrooms, you have no business sitting at your desk, do you? This simple disruption to your usual behavior—going back to the office and sitting down at your desk—is often enough to set you on the
path to success. When your calendar says it’s time for walkthroughs, and there’s no chair at your desk, why not obtain a similar reward of productivity by doing great walkthroughs?

By disrupting the routine, we’re changing the path of least resistance by adding resistance to the undesirable behavior, or removing it from the desirable behavior. That’s not to say this is a foolproof strategy, either; even after the behavior changes, we may still crave some of the rewards of our old behavior (such as avoiding uncomfortable confrontations with underperforming teachers). So we need additional strategies for dealing with those cravings.

#3: SHORT-CIRCUIT THE REWARD By Adding A Negative Consequence

I mentioned earlier that Duhigg’s cyclical model of Cue » Sequence » Reward » Cue... is misleading because the reward doesn’t trigger the cue; instead, it “reloads” the craving—the anticipated reward that drives the behavior—for the next time the cue appears.

What if we could prevent our unhelpful cravings from “reloading?” We can, and you’ve probably experienced this yourself—have you ever gotten a stomach bug or food poisoning after eating something you like, and found that your enjoyment of that food is gone, because it’s now associated with nausea? What if we could engineer this effect for all of our destructive habits?

It’s much easier to change a behavior when there’s no reward bringing us back to it time after time. When the craving is gone, the habit is easier to break.

Let’s say you want to keep your desk clear, but you enjoy the relief of leaving your desk and the headaches it causes—messy though it may be—for tomorrow. When you’re tired, letting it go is probably more rewarding than cleaning it up.

You could shift the balance in favor of cleaning it by offering your custodian an unbeatable deal: if your desk is messy when he or she comes to empty your trash can at night, you forfeit a $20 bill you’ve tacked to a corkboard for this purpose. Your custodian provides accountability without needing to confront you, and you have a $20 incentive to keep your desk clear. In setting up this incentive system, you’re actively damaging the reward pathway that’s reinforcing your undesirable behavior. This works for holding yourself accountable, but how can you avoid negative cues in the first place?

#4: REMOVE THE CUE To Avoid Triggering The Habit Loop

We can’t always control the cues that trigger our unhelpful habits, but when we can, it’s among the most effective methods of improving our performance. Without a cue, the habit loop never starts. If you’re addicted to checking Twitter every time your phone buzzes, turning off push notifications can solve most of the problem. If you’re constantly distracted by new emails, closing your email app will silence the popups.

Removing cues is a way of shaping your environment to help you achieve your goals. If you’re trying to lose weight, don’t leave junk food on the counter; if you can’t throw it out, at least keep it out of sight, so you’re not relying on sheer willpower to avoid indulging.

But what about cues that you can predict, but can’t prevent? Get ahead of them.

#5: PREEMPT THE CUE With Another Habit

As a principal, I’d often provide food for staff meetings, but several teachers would bring their own snacks—usually vegetables and other healthy fare. Even when I offered to provide healthier snacks along with the normal treats, they’d bring their own pre-planned snacks.

Why did they bother? To preempt the temptation to graze from whatever was available. Who can resist a Krispy Kreme donut on an empty stomach? Broccoli doesn’t stand much of a chance when placed side-by-side with sugar and fat, but if you fill up on vegetables before seeing the donuts, you’re much more likely to stick to your diet.

If you know it’ll be hard to use the “golden rule” in the heat of the moment—if choosing carrots over donuts is unlikely to work—you can get one step ahead of your bad habits by triggering a better habit just before the predictable cue: If there’s a staff meeting in 10 minutes, and there’ll be junk food, it’s time to pull out the healthy snack. If you know you’ll fall into the “two o’clock slump” if you’re sitting down, get up at 1:45 and get moving. Visit some classrooms or the playground, and you’ll find that staring at your inbox isn’t so inevitable as the afternoon wears on.

Preemptive cues are best managed with some sort of alarm or trigger, so you don’t have to remember them, and you may need to think back a few steps. If staff meetings (and donuts) are on Wednesday afternoon, set a recurring appointment on your calendar to pack a snack on Tuesday night. Preemptive planning doesn’t work as well with unpredictable cues, but combined with personal rules—the “golden rule” approach—as well as the other strategies outlined in this guide, it can set you up for success.
Taking Action & Making Changes

I hope you’ve found this model for habits, and these five strategies for changing your habits, to be helpful. Now it’s time to take action.

Use this page to identify the habits you’d like to work on next, and the strategies you’ll employ to change them.

Here’s a quick reminder of the five strategies we’ve outlined for changing habits:

1. Substitute the Sequence
2. Disrupt the Routine
3. Short-Circuit the Reward
4. Remove the Cue
5. Preempt the Cue
Now that you know how to modify your habits, what can you do to maximize your overall effectiveness?

As you start to work on purposefully managing your habits, you’ll notice that they build on each other. For example, I’m writing this article while walking (slowly) on the treadmill—both for the exercise, and because I’m much more likely to stay focused on writing while I’m putting one foot in front of the other.

And while it’s true that habits can compete with each other for your time—like exercise and email when I was on the road—there’s a more powerful factor to consider: willpower.

As the David Blaine example on p. 4 illustrates, willpower in one area of your life carries over into other areas. You might have noticed that many of the metaphors and examples I’ve used to explain habits are health-related, and that’s no accident.

There’s a strong connection between your self-efficacy and your actual effectiveness. Of course, being confident doesn’t make you competent, but a lack of self-efficacy will undermine your effectiveness as an instructional leader.

How We Develop Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is different from self-esteem in that it’s based on results—we feel more efficacious when we’ve developed a track record of being efficacious.

In his classic book Good to Great, Jim Collins talks about “the flywheel.” A flywheel is a massive cylinder that takes a long time to spin up, but once it gets going, it’s nearly unstoppable. It has incredible kinetic energy, because it has so much momentum.

When you “spin up” your habits, the energy you create can be used for any challenge you’re facing in work or in life. I’m speaking metaphorically, of course, but it’s also true in a very practical sense.

Foundational Habits

Some habits are more helpful than others for fostering the development of additional habits. Any change in behavior that will increase your physical or mental energy, or eliminate a destructive behavior, is probably a good place to start.

Let’s consider sleep. If you’re like most school leaders, you have to be at school early, and work probably keeps you up late—so you rarely get enough sleep. Making small changes to give yourself just an additional 30 minutes a night—perhaps by going to bed earlier, and skipping a TV show—can make an enormous difference.

Or consider exercise. The more you can increase your physical strength and cardiovascular endurance, the less likely you are to be worn out by your daily treks around campus, and the more energy you’ll bring to your work throughout the day.

In their book Willpower, Baumeister and Tierney explain that willpower is, in fact, like a muscle: it grows stronger with use, and it atrophies when neglected.

But you can start with non-physical habits, too. Do you get stressed out the moment you check your email in the morning? Then stop checking your email in the morning, and develop a starting routine that works for you.

Setting Goals

As you can see on p. 2, I’m using a service called Coach.me (http://coach.me and in your device’s app store) that allows me to track my daily goals. I have a goal to exercise five times a week, and another goal to empty my email inbox daily.

Without the clarity that these goals provide, I’d just “do my best” every day, without any meaningful indication of success. Was my best good enough today? Do I need to try harder? Did I waste time or make excuses? When I have a clear goal, I know the answer to these questions, and can adjust my behavior accordingly.

One foundational habit that you might work on, then, is to track your goals daily. You can sign up for Coach.me absolutely free, and you can even take a look at how well I’m sticking to my goals.
Tracking Time

Another way to shape your habits is to shape your use of time. I’ve just started on this, but I’m using an iPhone app called HoursTracker to “clock in” to different areas of responsibility in my life—work, exercise, family time, sleep, and so on. Right now I’m clocked into “work” and “exercise” since I’m writing on the treadmill.

There’s been a good deal of research on principal time use and time tracking, and it has important implications for improving our habits. As you can imagine, what we spend our time on is of the utmost importance.

But most of this research has found that analyzing the time we spend on various tasks by categorizing it—“instructional leadership” vs. “building management” vs. “building rapport with staff” and so on—is likely to be a wasted effort. When we’re at work, we’re rapidly shifting between activities with multiple, overlapping purposes. So I don’t recommend trying to categorize the type of work you’re doing, because it’ll take too much time to monitor, and it doesn’t matter all that much. If you’re doing what you need to do, you’re being productive.

But I do think time-tracking is valuable if it helps you increase your adherence to your habits. Try “clocking in” to different areas of responsibility, which will force you to pay more attention to whether you’re staying focused. Then, when you look back at your “timesheet” for the week, you can see where you’re wasting time.

When I started tracking my time, I realized right away that I was spending too much time on things like making coffee, checking social media, and otherwise taking breaks from my work. It’s helpful to take a quick break every hour, but I needed to make these breaks shorter.

It also helped me realize something a bit painful: some of what I was classifying as “family time” was really “clean up the house” time, when I wasn’t really engaging with my kids. I decided to track these times separately, so I don’t shortchange my family.

Within your work day, again, don’t try to distinguish between “instructional leadership” and “interruptions” and other abstract categories. It’s best to focus on what you’re physically doing. I recommend tracking time spent in meetings, time spent in classrooms, time spent in the office—that’s likely to yield more helpful insights. I’ll also be easier to remember to clock in and out, because you’re making a physical transition. My cue to pull up HoursTracker is simple: when I set foot in the hallway, it’s probably time to clock out of what I was doing, and clock in to what I’m doing next.

Give it a try, and figure out what changes you can make to build habits for high performance.

Adding Habits

As you build momentum with your foundational habits, you’ll find that it becomes easier to add new habits. When I’m caught up on email, it’s easier to get caught up on my to-do list, because I’m not worried about unseen tasks lurking in my inbox. When my desk is clean, it’s easier to be consistent about exercising—because, again, I’m less worried about surprises. When I follow my calendar, I can trust that I’ll be able to finish what’s on my to-do list.

I recommend focusing first on these “keystone” habits, in no particular order:

• Keep your desk clear
• Keep your inbox empty
• Work from your leadership agenda
• Keep your to-do list up to date
• Follow your calendar

These habits work together well, and can create much greater bandwidth for making decisions and accomplishing more of your key work.
On a personal level, you'll also find that it’s very rewarding to adopt and stick to habits like keeping your kitchen counters clear and crossing off all the chores you’ve planned for the day. Even if you don’t find great meaning in those tasks, the boost to your self-efficacy will carry over into your work.

**Reflection: Stacking and Tracking My Habits**

*Which habit(s) am I currently doing well with?*

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

*What's a next logical habit to add?*

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

*What's a habit I'd like to put in place, but haven't yet?*

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

*Is there another habit that needs to be in place first, before the habit I listed above is truly sustainable?*

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

*What changes do I need to make to my schedule, tools, or work practices to put the first habit in place?*

____________________________________________________________________________________

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____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________