

LIFE

Thursday, January 08, 2009

+++++ **The Blog of Tim Ferris: Experiments in Lifestyle Design**

The Power of Less: Changing Behavior with Leo Babauta by Tim Ferriss (46 Comments)
<http://www.fourhourworkweek.com/blog/2009/01/07/the-power-of-less-leo-babauta-zen-habits/>

Simple is beautiful (Photo: Razzziel)

To learn a skill, I often look — not for the best in the world — but for people who've made the greatest progress in the shortest period of time.

Thus, to gain muscle mass, for example, I would rather examine the training and diet log of someone who went from 145 - 185 lbs. in 1-2 months rather than consult with a 300-lb. professional who has been 300 lbs. for a decade. This also relates to the “explicit vs. implicit” (preach vs. practice) issues many top performers face when they can't articulate an unconscious competence. I faced this when I asked lifelong swimmers for technical advice.

Leo Babauta has been a incredible model for me in the world of blogging.

His blog, Zen Habits [<http://www.zenhabits.net/>], **went from 1 reader — his wife — to being one of the Technorati top-100 blogs in the world in less than 12 months.** Leo, who lives in Guam (how cool is that?), has built his audience by deconstructing his offline behavior as much as his online behavior...

In the last two years, he has:

- Quit smoking (on Nov. 18, 2005).
- Lost 40 pounds.
- Gone from a non-runner to completing several marathons and triathlons.
- Become a vegetarian.
- Tripled his income.
- Written a novel and a non-fiction book.
- Eliminated his debt.

Oh, and those children people like to use as justifications for inaction? No more excuses. Leo has six kids.

To illustrate a few of Leo's principles for changing behavior, I am pleased to offer several exclusive excerpts from Leo's new book, The Power of Less.

It is a fast read and a good reminder that — in a world where people tend to focus on the latest Firefox extensions and gizmos — **simple basic habits are the force multiplier, not new applications.** I added bolding to some parts I think are particularly important, as well as bracketed text [] for my comments.

The Power of Less

LIFE

From Chapter 5: Create New Habits and The Power of Less Challenge

The only way you'll form long-lasting habits is by applying the Power of Less: focus on one habit at a time, one month at a time, so that you'll be able to focus all your energy on creating that one habit.

The tool that you'll use to form each habit is an extremely powerful one: the Power of Less Challenge, a 30-day challenge that has proven very effective in forming habits for thousands of readers of my Zen Habits blog.

Here's how it works:

1. Select one habit for the Challenge. Only one habit per month. You can choose any habit — whatever you think will have the biggest impact on your life.

[Tim: This is also supported by research done by BJ Fogg of Stanford University. Want to teach 60-year olds to use an SMS program to help them quit smoking? It won't work. Those are two new behaviors. Choose one behavioral modification at a time.]

2. Write down your plan. You will need to specifically state what your goal will be each day, when you'll do it, what your “trigger” will be (the event that will immediately precede the habit that's already a part of your routine — such as exercising right after you brush your teeth), who you will report to (see below).

3. Post your goal publicly. Tell as many people as possible that you are trying to form your new habit. I suggest an online forum, but you could email it to coworkers and family and friends or otherwise get the word out to a large group.

4. Report on your progress daily. Each day, tell the same group of people whether or not you succeeded at your goal.

The Rules

There are only a few rules you need to follow to make this Challenge a success. If you follow these rules, it would be hard for you not to form a new habit by the end of the 30 days.

*** Do only one habit at a time. Do not break this rule, because I assure you that if you do multiple habits at once, you will be much less likely to succeed.** Trust me — I've tried both ways many times, and in my experience there is 100% failure for forming multiple habits at once, and a 50-80% success if you do just one habit at a time — depending on whether you follow the rest of these rules.

*** Choose an easy goal. Don't decide to do something really hard, at least for now.** Later, when you're good at habit changes, you can choose something harder. But for now, do something you know you can do every day. In fact, choose something easier than you think you can do every day. If you think you can exercise for 30 minutes a day, choose 10 minutes — making it super easy is one of the surest ways to ensure you'll succeed.

LIFE

* Choose something measurable. You should be able to say, definitively, whether you were successful or not today. If you choose exercise, set a number of minutes or something similar (20 minutes of exercise daily, for example). Whatever your goal, have a measurement.

* **Be consistent. You want to do your habit change at the same time every day**, if possible. If you're going to exercise, do it at 7 a.m. (or 6 p.m.) every day, for example. This makes it more likely to become a habit.

* Report daily. You could check in every 2 or 3 days, but you'll be more likely to succeed if you report daily. This has been proven over and over again in the Challenges.

* Keep a positive attitude! Expect setbacks now and then, but just note them and move on. No embarrassment in this challenge.

12 Key Habits to Start With

You can choose any habits in this book that you think will help you most, at work and in the rest of your life. But if I had to recommend 12 habits to start with (one each month for a year), these are the 12 I think could make the most difference in the lives of the average person (more on each habit in later chapters):

1. **Set your 3 MITs (Most Important Tasks) each morning.**
2. **Single-task. When you work on a task, don't switch to other tasks.**
3. Process your inbox to empty.
4. Check email just twice a day.
5. Exercise 5-10 minutes a day.
6. Work while disconnected, with no distractions.
7. Follow a morning routine.
8. Eat more fruits and veggies every day. [Tim: Here is the "slow-carb" breakfast I use to start my morning routine]
9. **Keep your desk decluttered.**
10. Say no to commitments and requests that aren't on your Short List (See Chapter 16, on the Simple Life).
11. Declutter your house for 15 minutes a day.
12. **Stick to a 5-sentence limit for emails.**

On Starting Small

Tim: Leo advocates, as I do, that you use smaller behavioral changes as a lever for major behavioral changes. In other words, start smart to seed the right habit before you aim to maximize output. In the beginning the habit is more important than the result.

Here are four good examples of "downsizing" behavioral changes, taken from pg. 42 of The Power of Less:

- * Exercise: Start with 5-10 minutes a day, instead of 30.
- * Waking early: Start by waking 15 minutes earlier, instead of an hour or two.
- * Productivity: Start by trying to focus on the task at hand for 5-10 minutes at a time.
- * Decluttering: Start with just one drawer, instead of trying to declutter your entire office or home.

LIFE

Here are a few other segments I highlighted in my own notes for The Power of Less:

- p. 51 Focusing on completion vs. organizing and filing
- p. 62 **Don't schedule appointments** (Tim: much like Arnold Schwarzenegger)
- p. 80 "What's the worst that will happen if I delete this?"
- p. 99 **Reducing commitments**
- p. 119 Decluttering the desk
- p. 128 Designate a home for everything:

Designate a home for everything, and be fanatic. When you find stuff on flat surfaces, or draping over a chair, it might be because you don't have a designated spot for that kind of thing. If you don't, designate a spot for it immediately. If stuff doesn't have a home in your home, you need to get rid of it, or it will forever wander around the house.

Remember: productivity shouldn't be complicated.

Putting a good tool on top of a bad habit (process) just multiplies garbage outputs. Forget the latest and greatest technologies and go back to basics. Routines and rules, not gizmos and tools.