

Step up
to
Mastery
with
E.A.S.E.

by Doug O'Brien
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*"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then,
is not an act but a habit."*

Aristotle

*"Life is what happens to you when you're busy
making other plans."*

John Lennon

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A few years ago or so, when I was a music major in college, I met a young man named Paul who was a brilliant violinist. I don't remember if he became the concert master of the school orchestra in his Freshman year or if it took him till Sophomore year to achieve that status, but he soon dominated the string department. In the competitive world of classical music it is usually pretty easy to find things not to like about people such as Paul but the thing about him I found most annoying of all is that he was a truly nice person. You couldn't not like him. I hated that! It didn't seem fair that one person should be handsome, talented and genuinely nice.

At lunch one day I struck up a conversation. I asked him if he'd come from a family of privilege and taken lessons from top teachers his whole life. (I was sure of it!) No, he said. Actually he'd come from a non-musical family and had only been taking lessons since 6th grade. And then his teacher, while competent, was not the fancy shmancy heavy hitter I imagined but his high school orchestra conductor.

Then what is your secret? I asked. "No secret," he said "just practice." He said he hadn't missed a day of practice since beginning his first year of lessons.

I was incredulous, but I'd discovered the secret. "Wow! So you what, practiced like 8 hours a day all those years?"

"No, not eight hours, but something everyday. Early on my teacher told me that if I practiced an hour or more everyday then I'd accomplish what I wanted musically. But that if I couldn't do that I should make sure that I at least got the fiddle out of it's case each day and hold it on my lap for five minutes. As long as I did something everyday I'd be OK."

Oh.

It wasn't massive action over a short period of time, it was consistent action over a period of time. Sometimes more, sometimes less, but always something.

But that takes time and its not very exciting. How can I get it now? Isn't there a pill I can take?

How do you get to Carnegie Hall?

I decided to give it a try and to my surprise it wasn't always easy as it sounded. I was a pianist and sometimes that 5 minutes of sitting at the piano was sometimes remarkably difficult. I'd be out partying too late and hung over (the drinking age was 18 back then and bars were open till 2) the next day and Beethoven and scales were the last thing I wanted to do. But I'd drag myself through it and you know what? It got easier. And most of the time, even on the days that I was planning to do just 5 minutes, I'd look up and discover I'd already been there for 15 minutes and was really close to my next plateau of 20 minutes so I'd plug on and before you knew it I'd be up to 1/2 hour.

Little by little my daily practice time increased to 2 hours on average and my weekly total started edging up past 15 hours or more. Soon it was up to 20 hours a week and I began to pride myself on setting new records and how good

I was getting at my instrument. I was enjoying it more than ever. I remember once not being able to practice because of travel in the snowy winter and school closings and it felt dreadful to be unable to get my practicing fix.

I remember reading Artur Rubenstein say that if he didn't practice for one day he could tell the difference. If he didn't practice for two days his wife could tell, and if he didn't practice for three days his audience could tell.

Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit." You are what you do everyday. So it could easily be said that successful people are people with constructive habits. Good runners run everyday. Musicians practice everyday. Dancers dance everyday. Not just to get good or even so much to stay good but because its who they are. And being who they are, practice is what they do, virtually automatically.

Remember the first time you learned to ride a bike or drive a car? It was not at all easy, was it? You had to really think about every little aspect of what you were doing and your results were less than glamorous. Yet today you do it elegantly with out even thinking about it. That is to say, your conscious mind is not thinking about it because your unconscious mind has learned the patterns necessary to perform the task properly.

Creating Positive Habits

So how do you develop these positive habits? The short answer is, by doing them consistently. The slightly longer answer would be you can do it one of two ways: you can do it with will power or you can do it with ease. (It is important to note that in our example that young Paul was gentle with

himself when it came to his practice [sitting with the fiddle on his lap for five minutes] while, at the same time, had his eye set on a higher goal [an hour + per day])

In more recent years I've become a success coach to a number of people in New York City from various strata of income. The people with whom I've been honored to work range from East Village starving artists to Wall Street investment bankers. It's been a fascinating learning experience for me because all these fine folk wanted the same thing... for me to help them create massive change in their lives (success). They also had common rules about the time frame in which they wanted this success now.

The problem is, with rules like that they were setting themselves up for failure. Because, if they didn't achieve their massive change in the time frame allowed, then it was over. This "all or nothing" mentality made it so if their arrow fell short of the moon they'd convince themselves they were hopeless and never be otherwise.

I believe Success is not a sprint but a Marathon. That taking massive action is fine, but it is the effort that you can sustain over time that truly creates success.

BECOME THE KIND OF PERSON WHO DOES WHAT YOU WANT TO DO

I'd suggest to them that successful people do their thing daily. It is part of their daily routine as much as a morning cup of coffee is for many people. It gets to a point where Not doing it would feel strange. Its not work, its not a particular effort, its just who they *are*.

Runners run. Actors act. Musicians play. Writers write.

So how do we create that for ourselves?

Universal Law of Habit Formation.

According to Dan Millman, author of "Way of the Peaceful Warrior", do something 36 days in a row and it becomes ingrained in your unconscious as a habit. This means 36 uninterrupted days. That is, if you practice your craft everyday for 15 days and then you skip a day, the day you resume practice is counted as number 1, not number 16. Therefore it is most beneficial if you make it easy for yourself to accomplish this. This is where the principle of EASE comes in.

EASE is a system of Multi-tiered goals. Like a Marathon runner saying before a race..." Well I'd love to win, but chances are slim for that, so I'd be delighted if I beat my own personal best. Short of that I'll be happy if I do well for my age, but I'll be satisfied as long as I finish.

Notice that our imaginary runner is on the happy side of things no matter what the result. There is, in fact, a pretty wide spectrum of results that are all positive.

An Apple a Day...

You know that old expression about an apple a day keeps the doctor away, don't you? Well? How many apples do you eat per day? And what about all those other metaphorical apples a day in your life? Do you floss your teeth everyday? Drink eight glasses of water a day? Make your bed? Eat the recommended number of portions of fruit and vegetables? What if you did? Would you enjoy the benefits they would bring you? What is stopping you?

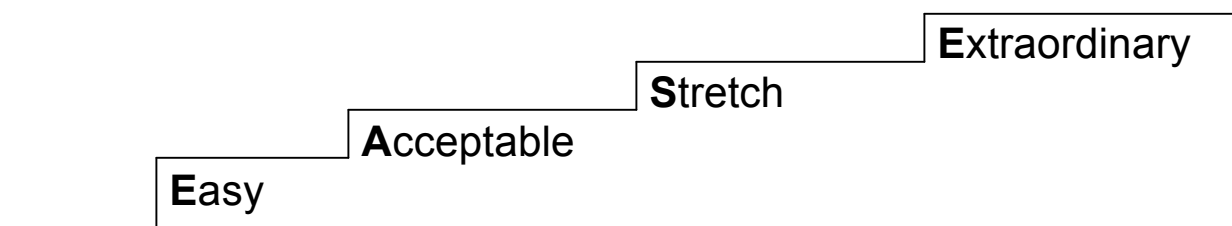
What is something that you know, if you did it everyday, would better your life? What is an easy enough level of doing it that provokes a "Well heck,I could do that," kind of response. Make note of that. Then do that.

Now.

Reward "Approximately-Right" Behavior

Shaping new behaviors comes from rewarding the desired behavior. In her wonderful book, "Don't Shoot the Dog" Karen Pryor describes attempting to teach dolphins a new behavior. It didn't take long to figure out that dolphins (and other intelligent life forms like people) don't respond favorably to traditional negative reinforcement (ie: punishment). They respond to creative positive reinforcement. Hence the EASE system makes it real easy to avoid any pain and thus enjoy various level of pleasure.

The levels of achievement could be codified as the following:



The Five Keys to utilizing E.A.S.E.

1. SELECT THE GOAL YOU WISH TO FOCUS ON. Start by imagining what you would like to accomplish.

2. THEN IMAGINE WHAT YOU COULD DO EVERYDAY to lead to the accomplishment of that goal. Imagine, in the best of all worlds how much of this activity you'd like to do daily. List that as your **STRETCH** level goal. (I'll explain why this is the best place for that in a minute.)

3. DECIDE WHAT WOULD BE THE MINIMUM AMOUNT of that activity that you could do easily and still count as something. This is your **EASY** level.

4. SPLIT THE DIFFERENCE between your Easy level and your Stretch level. This will be your **ACCEPTABLE** level.

5. THEN IMAGINE WHAT YOU'D ENJOY BRAGGING THAT YOU DO EVERYDAY. Put that in as your **EXTRAORDINARY** level. Don't make it too extreme. Something you could conceivably actually do from time to time.

That's it, bucko. Not rocket science, I'll grant you, but it works. Make sure you simply do SOMETHING everyday. *Strive* for the extraordinary and you'll stretch yourself. As you do, there will be days you'll find are acceptable and days when you'll be very happy to do the easy level. But each day, as you do something toward your goal, you will get into the habit of doing it and little by little your unconscious mind will create the mental/emotional construct that this is who you are. Not simply a person who runs but a runner. Not simply a person who writes but a writer. Not just a person

who does what they love, but a person who is that that they love.

That is the secret. Don't tell anyone. Keep this between you and me.

Goals both Realistic *and* Motivational

Let's talk for a minute about the above step number two and why that's your "stretch" goal. It is because of the principle of "follow through."

One of my favorite events that I've had the privilege of teaching for the past ten years is a wood-breaking experience to high schoolers in an annual leadership camp in New Jersey. In one evening we use the metaphor of karate style wood breaking to give these students an experience of "breaking through" obstacles that stop them. It is a thrill for them to discover that they really can do something they were sure was impossible and see their faces light up as they draw the parallel between this and their lives overall.

It is also a great metaphor for is the idea of follow through and aiming beyond your goals. The secret in wood breaking is to aim beyond the wood. You imagine that the real target is about 3 inches beyond this piece of wood that is in your way and you go through it in order to get to your target. If you were to aim at the surface of the board your hand will take most of the beating and the board will most likely remain intact. You must extend beyond the plane of the board you are striking and follow through to reach for it. The board doesn't stand a chance.

So it is with goal setting. You must be constantly striving beyond what you really want. Enough but not too much. What's too much? Something unrealistic. Most diets and exercise programs that fail do so for this reason. They set goals that are too far beyond what they can realistically do. At least what they can realistically do at first and from will power alone. The extraordinary goal should be one that you could conceivably do and perhaps do from time to time.

Imagine asking an fledgling body builder to dead lift 300lbs in one week's worth of training. While not impossible, it is highly unlikely. It is much better to start where you are and build up from there in your own way.

The Waiter's Dream

Here's a real life example of sights possibly set too high. I was working a little while ago with a client who had gone to a seminar and gotten totally pumped up about making a huge fortune. He believed that since the seminar leader had himself gone from being broke to being a millionaire practically overnight, that all he had to do was believe it wholeheartedly, get pumped up, take massive action and bada boom -bada bing, he'd be rich.

Unfortunately it hadn't worked out that way and he totally bottomed out. Not only was he depressed that he was still in debt and still in the same financial straits, he now also owed for the seminar, which was pretty expensive!

So I asked him what had been his plan. First of all, where was he starting from? What was his line of work and what plans did he have for earning the money?

He was a waiter in a nice restaurant in Greenwich Village. A good night would get him a couple hundred or so in tips. I asked him if he knew how much he needed in tips each night to add up to a million in a year. He didn't. So we did the math. He would need to make at least \$2,739.73 each day of the year. He would need to not spend any of it and really avoid the IRS.

His response was three parts.

1. He didn't know it was that much and didn't think he could get that waiting tables.(I agreed)
2. He didn't like that part about not spending any. (who would?)
3. He'd forgotten about taxes.

So we agreed to looking at his goals in a different way. Without abandoning his overall desire to be rich, we came up with a measurable goal he could actually attain (over a few years) and a plan that he could actually carry out. A plan that would allow him to grow into being the kind of person, doing the appropriate job, that could get him where he wants to go.

When last I saw him he was happily progressing toward his goal with e.a.s.e.

Running Marathons

Let's look at another real-life example.

A number of years ago I decided I wanted to run a marathon. So I began training for one and soon made a very interesting discovery... it was *hard!*

You've got to run really far!

Not only that, it was challenging in a variety of ways. You have to run a lot in order to get into shape in order to do it, but not too much so you don't get injured. And, honestly, for me one of the hardest things about it was getting off the couch and out the front door on a regular basis. So that's when I started applying this EASE system.

I made my "Easy" level literally to get out the front door with my sneakers on and just run a little bit. That's it... lacing up the sneakers, getting outside and running up to the corner of my block.

Little did I know I was stumbling upon the living embodiment of Newton's first law's of physics.

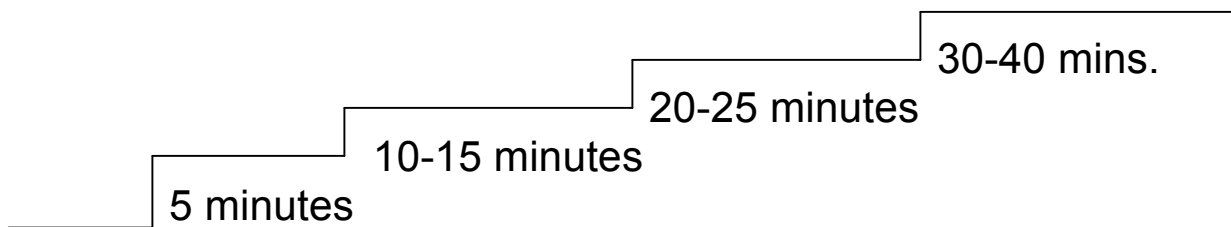
Overcoming Inertia

Newton's first law of classical physics states, essentially, that "a body at rest tends to stay at rest unless acted upon by an outside force." Newton goes on to say that "a body in motion tends to stay in motion unless acted upon by an outside force."

Newton was thinking about an abstract body like a ball or a planet. I'm talking about my BODY. It applies to me too!

But once you get out the front door and get your body from being at rest to being in motion, it's pretty easy to keep going.

And, once you've taken that easy first step on our "EASE" ladder, it's also then relatively easy to accomplish the second step. So my second level was not that much more difficult really; it was running for 10-15 minutes. Low and behold, once I was at the 15 minute level I would very easily get to my stretch level which was 20-25 minutes. (I was also pretty far away from home and had to get back somehow!) and sometimes I would even get to my extraordinary goal which was to run for 30-40 minutes.



As I got into better shape, it was easier and easier to accomplish those levels so I needed to reevaluate. Just getting out the front door was not good enough anymore. (Generally speaking, the easy level isn't good enough, really, to get you to where you want to go in life, but it overcomes inertia and that is the vital first step)

So I upped my easy level to run for 20 minutes, my acceptable level was to run for 30, my stretch level was to run for 45, and my extraordinary level was to run for an hour.

Soon I reevaluated again and began to measure my runs by miles rather than minutes and had to recalculate. 1-2 miles was easy, 3-5 was acceptable, 6-8 miles was a stretch and 9 and above was extraordinary.

Recalculation must be inherent in the system for it to work long term. As you improve, reevaluate your levels to be commensurate with your progress.

In my example I later began to calculate my weekly mileage instead of the daily count. That allowed for the hard day/easy day to training recommended to me by my running coach.

It was pretty easy to do 15 miles of running over seven days. My acceptable level was 25, the stretch level was 35 and 40 miles a week was my extraordinary level.

Most importantly, throughout this process, I was evolving my *self image*. Remember that "Universal Law of Habit Formation" I mentioned near the top of this article? It states that if you do something 36 days in a row it becomes ingrained in you as a habit.

I think it goes deeper than that. I think it changes how we define ourselves on the "*Identity*" level; WHO we believe ourselves to be. I had evolved my self image into seeing myself as a *Runner*. I was no longer a couch potato trying to get into shape. Running wasn't just what I did, it was *who I was*.

Remember: Reward "Approximately-Right" Behavior

While running all those miles over all those months I also remembered to treat myself like a dog. That is, I remembered Karen Pryor's book "Don't Shoot the Dog" and gave myself small rewards for my accomplishments. I didn't do anything extravagant. Basically I just kept a running journal and wrote down how much I ran each day and totaled up each week's mileage.

It felt good to see what I'd done and I felt proud to see a week with every day's blank filled in. When my week's total mileage reached a new high I'd circle the total and add a couple of exclamation points.

Whenever I competed in an organized race I'd write down my time and draw a starburst around it. If I set a new "PR" (personal record) I rewarded myself with using a highlighter to color in that starburst and emphasize my feat.

I know it's silly but using this method and some other very good coaching I was able to finally accomplish my extraordinary goal of running a fast-enough Marathon to qualify to compete in the Boston Marathon. That qualifying time even has gold stars around it in the journal.

The EASE method is not right for every goal

Now, it's also true that EASE isn't necessarily the right process for every goal. There are some short-term goals that this isn't necessarily applicable for, as an example, quitting smoking. Over the years I've helped thousands of people quite smoking and the easiest way to do it is to just quit. Hypnosis works fantastically well for the purpose, but you just do it. You just quit. Cold turkey, as they say.

I think that to apply these EASE principles to cutting down from smoking from two packs to half a pack to whatever would usually just be an excuse to not quit smoking. The best way to do it is just do it.

There are other goals like that too, deadline-driven goals like getting your taxes done on time or handing in that school

report on time. Your deadline-driven things you just buckle down, get in state, and get it done.

With the EASE method we're more about life-long life-style changes. Weight loss would be a perfect application because you really want to lose weight and to keep it off. Not to do the common "go on a diet, lose a little bit of weight and then gain it back again." We want a lifestyle change so that we lose weight and keep it off.

Applying the EASE method allows you to change the definition of who you are to that of a healthy eater and exerciser.

You can apply this EASE method to the dietary process: You can apply it to calorie counting. You can apply it to how many vegetables you're eating per day or servings of food to vegetables you're eating today. You can apply it to portions sizes. You can apply this EASE process to create a new change in yourself that lasts a lifetime.

Balancing Acts and Reacts

The last important factor in successfully implementing the EASE method is balance. You must foster a balance between being easy on yourself and being hard on yourself – being disciplined and yet being gentle. That's right, BOTH at the same time.

One of the lessons that the study of hypnosis has taught me is that your unconscious mind can utilize and appreciate a both and awareness; it can operate with a both/and logic.

Built into the EASE process is a balance of being both gentle and disciplined at the same time. You do want to strive for

the extraordinary. You do want to constantly improve while at the same time feel good about (and reward yourself for) what you've accomplished. It's not one or the other; it is a process of utilizing both.

Persistence is key and utilizing this EASE system can really help you create a lifestyle and a definition of who you are at your identity level. It helps you create a life that's really a masterpiece.

Doug O'Brien © 2011

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