



Guest

James Clear is the Author of the book - Atomic Habits that has sold more than 1 Million Copies globally. He is the creator of The Habits Academy and runs the website jamesclear.com where he writes about habits and human potential. The central question he is trying to answer through his work is "How can we live better". He has a weekly newsletter where he shares some of his ideas and this goes out to more than Half a Million subscribers who benefit from his thinking. To subscribe to his newsletter, you could just go to Jamesclear.com.

In our conversation we spoke about several elements that he has covered in the book. We first spoke about his journey and how he came to studying and researching habits. We then spoke about how we should think about building habits in the right areas. James says that we need to work hard on the things that come easily to us! We explore that in the context of transitions and relate that to the notion of keeping the identity small. We then dive into the notion of the plateau of latent potential which we all are likely to encounter when we get into a new domain. We also discuss how we can ensure that we don't become slaves of habits and try to cultivate habits with awareness (something that we can learn from the Japanese train conductors!). We then go on to speak about the role of the environment in building habits and wrap up by talking about the notion of the gateway habit.

Context to the full conversation

Hello listeners - Happy New Year and Welcome to the 52nd conversation at the Play to Potential Podcast. This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. I am an Executive Coach and I help leaders play to their unique potential by helping them with the two questions – where to go and how to grow. These questions are quite parallel to the two questions businesses answer in the context of their strategy – where to play and how to win.

In this podcast series, I talk to leaders from multiple domains (CEOs, Sportsmen, Artists, and Thought Leaders) on three broad themes – Leadership, Transitions and Careers.

This is the time of year where we make lofty goals for the year ahead and unravel the 2020 vision for our business and ourselves. I thought it would be good for us to reflect on having a system that will ensure that we are able to achieve the goals we set for ourselves. In that context, I am excited to present my conversation with James Clear, the author of the book Atomic Habits. He says "you don't rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems". Let me just pause for a second and let that sink in. Let me just pause a second for that to sink in "you don't rise to the level of your goals. You fall to the level of your systems".

I learnt a lot from this conversation, and I trust that you will find it purposeful too. Towards the end of the podcast, I share some thoughts on how we could share some of our stories around habits so

that we could learn from each other and raise our game. Do listen on till the end to participate in this exercise.

Without further ado, let's tune into my conversation with James Clear.

Transcription

Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): James really excited to have you at the Play to Potential podcast. Thanks so much for making the time.

James Clear (JC): Yeah, of course, thanks for having me on, it's nice to talk to you.

DJ: Maybe before we dive into the specific James about Atomic Habits, I would love to get a sense of how you got here? Tell us a little bit about the why behind the what you do.

JC: Sure, so I sort of came to this topic through two different ways. One is personal and one professional. On the personal side I played sports while I was growing up and ended up suffering this serious injury when I was in high school; I was hit in the face with a baseball bat and the fallout from that injury was significant and extended, it took 8 or 9 months for me to recover, I wasn't able to drive a car for that time, I was practicing basic motor patterns like walking in a straight line and I was taking my physical therapy sessions. And it was a period in my life where I was forced to start small. It was the first time where I really didn't have a choice, I couldn't try out to attack a habit in a bigger way. And so, I started focusing on the small things like going to bed at the same hour each night or preparing for class for an hour each day or this was the first time in my life when I wanted to gym consistently, first once or twice a week and then three or four times. And individually those habits don't really sound very significant but collectively they gave me a sense of control over my life again and I was able to continue those habits and follow that arc and I didn't get to play very much in high school but I did make it to my college team and continued to progress throughout university and ultimately felt like I was able to make the most of the potential that I had as a player and ended up being in the American team which is, about 30 players around the country are on that team. So, I have this personal side that I have been exposed to small habits and then there was a more professional side. So, I studied science in undergrad mostly heart sciences, chemistry, physics, biology and then I went to business school and got a graduate degree and afterward I started my own business and for the first two years I tried things but just kind of flopped around and didn't really make much progress and I realized that one of the reasons I was struggling was because I didn't understand how to market anything, I didn't know like why would somebody buy a product, sign up for an email list or basically why do customers take action. So, I started studying consumer psychology to see if I could improve my business in some way and that started to naturally uncover and reveal some ideas around behavioural psychology and habit formation and the more that I read about that the more that those two sides of habits my personal side and experiences as an athlete and then my professional side and interest in science started to merge. So, I started to be interested in the science of how habits form and the biology and nerve science and other work, what regions of the brain are involved and the more that I studied those topics the more I started to see oh, I can actually use some of those ideas and apply them to my current weight lifting habits or diet habits or creativity habits and those were ideas that I had used when I was an athlete and so on. And I think that kind of summarizes where I am at now and the role that my work plays which are my articles and certainly Atomic Habits. When I wrote the book, I wanted to be a bridge between academic research and practical application. So, I kind of view that as my job to take scientifically

grounded ideas about how habits work and how behaviour changes and then distil that in some way that we can use in a practical sense or how do I actually use this in my daily life more. So, that's how I came to the writing and work that I do now.

DJ: And we will get to the specifics of some of the things you say about how to build habits and break habits but one of the things I really liked in the book given that I am curious about transitions is you say that you work hard on the things that come easy, right? You go on to say that a good player works hard to win the game that others are playing; a great player creates a new game that favours the strengths and avoids their weaknesses. Say more about the crux of the insight here James.

JC: So, this passage comes from a chapter where I talk about the influence of genes and personality on habits and behaviour and the basic idea is that we all have certain set of strengths, you know, there is some unique combination of strengths and weaknesses that make up each of us and you can't control the genes that you are handed or the cards that you are dealt but you can control how you play those cards or what game you choose to play. And so, as much as possible you want to play games where the odds are in your favour, where you are more likely to be able to succeed. Now, this can mean a couple of different things. First, in sort of like the personality sense, the most robust measure of personality is what psychologists call the big 5. So, it measures personality in five spectrums, the one that people are most familiar with is introversion on one side and extroversion on the other but there are a variety of others openness to experience, conscientiousness etc. and for all five of these spectrums they have been linked to the underlying genetic code somewhere, there is some connection between your DNA and that personality. So, as an example people who are high in agreeableness, which is one of those spectrums, tend to be warm and kind and considerate. And then you can imagine that someone's personality is that they are high in agreeableness so they are warm and kind and maybe they are also high in extroversion. Well, it might be much easier for them to build a habit like writing thank you cards or organizing social gatherings and getting people together for after work and things like that because it aligns more with their natural skill set. So, the first step in this I think is raising self-awareness, once you can become more aware of who you are, what your strengths are, what you are naturally inclined to do, you can start to seek out habits, behaviours, games where it's more likely that you would be able to succeed in that realm. So that's kind of the core idea and then the big takeaway I think is that a lot of the time people don't like talking about genes or DNA or your biological inclinations because they feel like oh, well, if it's in my genetic code then why bother, it must be fixed but I don't think that's the right lesson to take from this. I think instead the lesson is your genes don't tell you not to work hard, what they tell you is where to work hard, they don't say it doesn't matter what your strategy is because it is just destiny instead, they inform your strategy. So, by having better self-awareness you could develop a better strategy to work for you and your goals.

DJ: And just picking on that James is there something to be said about when we have clarity on these things? I was talking to Herminia Ibarra, who is a professor at London Business School who has written the book "Working Identity" and she talks about transitions and really way finding your way into something else. So, on the things that come easy how challenging or straightforward is it for people to figure that out as they think about why they want to build the habits?

JC: Yeah, that's a great question. I don't think anybody has a perfect answer to this, but there are a couple of things that you can look for. So, the first thing that you can do is, and this is something that I have referenced in the book as well, the basic idea is called the explore exploit trade-off and so, early on in any process what you want to do is explore broadly. So, you can do this as a big of a level as you want or a small as a level. So, a big level would be what should I do for my career? Well, perhaps for the first say 5 years or first decade you actually explore kind of widely, maybe you take a

different job every two years, maybe you try a few different industries, intern at a couple of different places but the idea here is to develop a range of experiences. Maybe you are in the same company but you just change to different departments every few years. So, the idea here is to explore widely so you can get exposure to a lot of possible paths and then once you have that experience then you can start to narrow and switch from explore to exploit which is let me take advantage of the best option I know of now. And so that's kind of a big way to do that. We do this for example with relationships, this is the period of dating as what we call explore and then once you decided to get married or commit to someone then we are talking about exploiting the one relationship that works best for you. So, you can also do it on a small scale. So, for example let's say you have a project and you have six weeks to complete it. Well, for the first week or two may be actually you brainstorm a bunch of different ways to attack the project, you research a lot of potential options but then as you get closer and closer to the deadline, now it starts to become more urgent that you actually get it done and so rather than always looking for a better solution you just commit to the solution that you are closest to at that point. So, there are kind of two ways to make that distinction. The one is how close am I to the deadline, how close am I to meeting the result now and if you are getting closer then it's like well, maybe I should just focus on the best solution I have found. The other way to do this though is that the more that you are getting results, the more you should exploit the option you have and the less that you are getting results the more you should explore for other options and that is... again and it is hard to describe this and what exactly you should do for any individual but people kind of implicitly know what that feels like. Like, for example, when I started my business I started three or four different websites for the first two years and none of... they all went okay but none of them really did well and then when I started jamesclear.com I was about a little over two years in and it just went better. I was writing about habits and behavioural change for the first time, previously I had been trying a bunch of other things related to business and marketing and when I started writing about that the audience just took off much faster than usual and so while it's hard for me to describe exactly what that should feel like for you, if you are trying a variety of things you will know when the results will come in easier and that's one of the good pieces of advice that I got early on was try things until something comes easily and it doesn't mean that it's easy in the sense that you barely have to put your effort in but it does mean that the results come much easier than the other things that you are trying.

DJ: And just moving on to another thing that you explained in the book James, you talk about one of the investors Paul Graham and you refer to his quote "keep your identity small". You go on to say that more you let a single belief define you the less capable you are of adapting when life challenges you. I found that really thought provoking. So, talk to us about the insight here and how it links with building or breaking habit.

JC: Yeah, so I think identity is a huge factor of life but also particularly tied to our habits. So, let's think about this from a big picture level first. So, you have identities that can build you up, for example, like I am a type of person who reads a lot or I am a type of person who finishes workouts or I am a type of person who finishes what I start and then you also have identities that hold you back. So, something like I am terrible with directions or I am bad at remembering people's names or I have a sweet tooth or I am bad at math and we are all a collection of identities like there are multiple things that are a part of you like you might say I am a dad, I am a brother and a neighbour and a volunteer, and a teacher or whatever and it's not just labels that are part of your identity like dad and teacher and friend and neighbour, it's also those internal beliefs, that narrative that you assign to yourself and the more that you let one of those beliefs take over your entire identity or occupy too large of a portion the more that you are fragile and brittle in that way because if you lose that one thing then it feels like you lose your whole self. So, as an example you often hear this with people who are in the military. They might define themselves part of their identity might be I am a

solider, right, I am a good soldier and then once they leave the military suddenly, they are not that anymore and so there's this like loss of identity versus sense of self that they feel like it was. On a similar level I felt that when I stopped playing sports. For like 20 years a big part of my identity was I am an athlete and then all of a sudden one year that was the final time I played and then I wake up the next day and what am I not going to play anymore and that's like whom I was defining myself as. So, I think one way to get around this is that you can focus on the more enduring aspects of a particular identity that you can take with you or carry with you into a new context. So, for example, in the soldier's case they could say well rather than assigning the identity I am a soldier I could assign identities like I am reliable or I am a good team mate or I have the back of those around me. Well that's something even once you are not a soldier you can come back into the workforce or go to a business you can still be reliable and be a good team mate and so on. Same way for athletes, they could say something like I am the type of person who trains my body hard or I am consistent and show up to work each day and like you can do the things as an athlete you can do those things as an individual. So, a part of that is the separating of the identity or the defining it in a better way but the other aspect of this and this is the part that you referenced with Paul Graham's quote "keep your identity small" is that the tighter you claim to any individual identity the harder it becomes to grow beyond it. So, you see this in pretty much any area of life. The tighter you claim to the idea that like a teacher who has been teaching for 20 years and have their lesson plans figured out and it's like this is the way it is, the tighter you cling to that the harder it becomes to grow beyond that, learn new different learning methods, new learning modalities, change your course structure etc. The surgeon who is like this is the way we do the operation even though there might be a new technology that allows them to do it in no less invasive manner, the tighter you claim to that previous identity the harder it becomes to grow beyond it. And this is one of the real challenges for building habits which is that early on building a new identity is a really valuable thing because it can get you to stick to the habit. So, for example, let's say that you are not fit right now but you want to start getting in shape, building the identity of I am runner is a really valuable way to get you to stick to that when you are running. But then what happens you know 20 years from now if you injure your knee or your hip and it's not possible for you to run anymore and now you feel like yeah, you have lost this sense of self and so you need to transition to a new identity. So the process here is not like a line, it's much more like a circle, you are continually evolving, continually updating and expanding and revising your beliefs and you really need to be committed to doing that and if you can keep your identity small it makes that process easier because it's like retouching a painting. If your identity is so large that it consumes everything about you then all of a sudden getting rid of that aspect feels like you are tearing yourself in two. So, for all of those reasons keeping your identity small could be a valuable way to continue to grow or evolve and expand.

DJ: It reminds me of a term that is often used in the context of... I have come across that in the context of Buddhism which is attachment yet detachment. So, it's interesting you are talking about identity as something that is helpful at some levels but at the same time being too attached to it at the same time can be a constraint later on. So, it's interesting the way you phrase it.

JC: Yeah, and you can think of your habits as... I think this is one of the ultimate reasons that habits really matter. We often talk about habits as the pathway to getting external results. So you might say something like oh, yeah, build better habits and you can get six pack abs or lose weight or double your income or reduce stress and it's true, habits can help you do all those things but the real reason that habits matter is that they reinforce your desired identity. So, every time that you perform a behaviour the way that I summarize this in the book is every action you take is like a vote for the type of person you want to become. So in a sense your habits are how you embody a particular identity like every time that you make your bed you embody the identity of someone who is clean and organized, every time that you make a healthy meal and cook that at home rather than eating

out you embody the identity of someone who is focused on eating healthy. Every time that you write one sentence you embody the identity of a writer and know those little actions, those tiny habits do not radically transform your body overnight, they don't lead to a written book in a single day but they do cast a vote for being that kind of person. So early on that's really powerful because those habits provide evidence of this new identity that give you a reason to root that belief in something. So it can be a very powerful thing to adopt to a new identity, could be very powerful to look at yourself in this new light and habits and think of the best path to doing that but use down the line when it's time for another change or another upgrade you also have to be willing to repeat the cycle again and continue to grow and evolve.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here. When I work with leaders in transition, I often find that they attach surface level labels to themselves which is often either tied to one or more of 3 things - the profession (I am a consultant or a Banker or an investor), to the industry (for instance people say, I work in Financial Services, Health care or Consumer) or to the function (I am a Finance person, Marketing person or an Ops person). Building on what James says, there is often a different way of looking at ourselves and sometimes this input can come from the outside. One of my guests in the podcast – Atul Kasbekar (AK) – spoke about how he transitioned from Photography to Producing movies. He traces it back to a chat he had with a family friend who looked at him differently.

AK: *"I mean I have more of a friend who is a spiritual guy and he lives in Bangalore and he was saying that this is the excellent space for you because what you may not see but what he sees and it actually turned out to be quite true, he says you know you actually a very habitable platform for people otherwise who would never meet each other to be pulled on to and to co-exist and work in a harmonious way and be able to create."*

DJ: There is an inverse correlation between the range of possibilities you consider when you are in transition and the identity you carry about yourself. And sometimes, this new insight doesn't come from the inside but comes when you speak to or get some-one to speak to the people around you. Bearing that in mind would be of great help as you evaluate possibilities during your transition.

One of the entrepreneurs I was working with came to me saying, I have spent 10-15 years building a business. I now have the opportunity of taking it from 100 to 300 X with my brother, or I could start something a fresh and build something from scratch. Or may-be I could start a PE fund and mentor start-ups given my experiences in my journey. Or I could take a break since I had kids recently and spend time as a father for a while. I was speaking to one of his close friends from childhood on how I could help this leader because he was known to be a good problem solver and a strategic thinker. So, I asked this friend "how can I really be of help to this leader with the question he is grappling with". His response to me was "help him sort out his identity and he is smart enough to figure the rest out"; is he an entrepreneur, a husband, a father, a brother or a mentor or something else. Not that these are either-or but the point I want to make is that especially when people are at cross-roads, solving the identity is a key part of the equation without which we may not get to a meaningful answer. If this topic is of interest, you might like the book Working Identity by Herminia Ibarra (HI) (one of the leading thinkers in transitions). Herminia was on the podcast and here is her nugget.

HI: *"These are people who have been very driven in careers that are very greedy that take all and so for a lot of us we do have other anchors for identity and may things that we do outside the main day job. The more that main day job is kind of a monolithic thing that takes all. The harder it is to*

extricate yourself and then you know you start to see that it's just not just the money it's that is your identity and it is really scary to move beyond that."

DJ: You could specifically listen to the nugget – transitioning from well-paying time greedy careers where she speaks about such careers not just being time consuming but identity consuming. You might also find the curated play-list on identity of interest. Now let's get back to the conversation with James Clear.

DJ: And just picking up on the thing you just said James you also say that progress is often exponential and not linear and in a similar note you talk about the notion of plateau of latent potential. Could you talk about these two themes in the context of how people think about habits and also the kind of feedback loops they set for themselves as they are building the habits?

JC: Yeah, good question. So, let's talk about the idea of compounding an exponential progress first. So, I like to refer to habits as the compound interest of self-improvement and what I mean is that the same way that money multiplies through compound interest the effects your habits multiply as you repeat them across time and the challenging part of any compounding process is that the greatest returns are delayed and so on day 1 or day 10 or day 30 you don't really have very much to show for your effort, the curve only takes off down the line once you hit that hockey stick portion once it really takes off and this is exactly what it feels like to building new habit, like what is the difference on day 1 of eating a salad for lunch or eating a burger and fries, not a whole lot, you know, like your body looks the same in the mirror at the end of night, the scale hasn't really changed, you don't really have anything to show for the effort that you are putting in. It's only 2 or 5 or 10 years later that you turn around and it's like wow, those daily habits really do add up. So, in that way building habits is kind of like this exponential curve, you rethink I will put a little bit of work in and I will get a little bit results so I'll put a lot of work in and there will be a lot of results. But really, it's much more about time and letting it work for you and just getting 1% better each day can count for something very significant in the long run. And so, this is what I like to say if you have good habits, good habits make time your ally, all you need is for time to work for you, to let another day move by and you could continue to be put in a better and better position. But bad habits make time your enemy. Every day that clicks by you are putting yourself a little bit further behind it or you are digging the hole a little bit deeper. So, for all of those reasons I think habits are what we can say the compound interest in self-improvement. Now, the next step at this is what you are mentioning what the plateau linked potential and the basic idea here is this challenge and I just mentioned where the returns are delayed, you show up and you are not seeing the results that you want and I like to summarize those by telling a brief little story which is imagine that you walk into a room and it's cold, you can see your breath, ice cube is sitting on the table and you start to heat the room up slowly, you would go and say, do you want me to use Fahrenheit or Celsius, what would your audience get better?

DJ: Celsius is better

JC: Okay, alright so let's say we are heating up this ice cube right and it's I don't know, -5 degrees or something like that and you are heating it up, -4, -3, -2, -1 and the ice cube is still sitting there, you can still see your breath but then you go from -1 to 0 and it's a 1-degree shift just like all those that came before it but suddenly the ice cube melts, you hit this phased transition and the process of improving is very much like that. The process of building better habits and getting results is very much like the process of heating of an ice cube. You hear people say things like this all the time, they'll say like I have been running for a month but I can't see a change in my body, and my argument is running for a month and complaining about not seeing the results you want or writing

your book for eight months and not having it be finished yet, it's kind of like complaining about heating an ice cube from -5 to -1 degrees and not melting, like the work was not being wasted, it's just being stored and so you can view each iteration of your habit as building up this potential energy that can then be released later on. I think about there's this quote from the San Antonio Spurs NBA basketball teams, they have won five championships and they have this quote hanging in their locker room and it says something to the effect of when I feel like giving up I think about the stone cutter who takes his hammer and bangs on the stone a 100 times without it showing a crack and then one the 101st blow it splits in two and I know that it wasn't the 101st that did it but all those that came before and that is true for pretty much any habit, right, like it's not the final sentence that writes the book, it's all those that came before, it's not the latest workout that gets your body fit, it's all those that came before. So, the willingness to accept that 1% improvements make a meaningful difference even if they don't show you anything on a given day and then remaining committed to that in the long run, that I think is how you capture the power of compounding habits and of letting 1% percent improvements work for you rather than against you.

DJ: And if I may reconcile this with the point about working hard on the things that come easy and looking for where you are seeing success and really doubling down on it, at some level I see a little bit of a paradox here right where here you need to chip away at something and suddenly there's a phase transition where you see the outcomes. With that sort of a delay in knowing where you are seeing outcomes how do you relay that to the context of where you are trying to build habits? Do you see a little bit of a complexity there that we need to navigate through?

JC: There is definitely a challenge with the speed at which you get feedback. So, the faster you can get feedback the more likely you are to stick to it. Actually, we could rephrase feedback a little bit to say the faster that you get signals of progress, the more that you get signals of progress the more motivated you are going to feel to stick with it. If you don't have signals of progress then it feels like you are just kind of stuck in this valley of death and spinning your wheels. So, there are a couple of ways to overcome this. The first thing, and I have a chapter in the book where I talk about measurements and both the pros and cons of it, how it can kind of work for you but the first thing is you want to choose a measurement that delivers feedback at the right pace because if we get feedback too quickly, it just kind of noise and you are like overreacting to everything, if you get feedback too slowly then it takes too long and we were into the problem that you just mentioned which is what you say you need to stick with but how do I know if this is actually working for me, how do I know if this is something that I am inclined to be good at. So, you can imagine for example let's take a workout. If you only measure the number of the scale while that might not actually be too slow because you might not actually change your weight in any meaningful way until like over a two-week span or something. If you measure say your blood glucose levels that might be too fast or your heart rate or your blood pressure because it might change very rapidly during the workout. But if you do something like tracking your workout, like just putting x on the calendar each day that you swim or go for a run or lift weights, well that like is feedback at the right pace which is I showed up and I did the workout today and so I can feel good about that and seeing another x on the calendar is like a signal of progress that I am building up this chain of habits, this chain of workouts. So, I am not waiting too long and I am not overreacting to something too short but figuring out that measurement, that right pace, it might take a little bit of experimentation depending on the habit you are working on but the point that you bring up is a really good one which is we do face this challenge where in many fields, pretty much any field, persistence and reliability and consistency will get you better results but along the way you really need some signals of progress so that you can be sure that you are on the right path and not just repeating something that isn't going to pay off in the longer run.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: This is your host Deepak Jayaraman here.

How we think about setting up feedback loops during transition is a personal passion project of mind because when people are in transition, not only are they at the foothills of the compounding curve, they are also in a phase of identity vacuum and they are keen to cling on to the first straw that comes their way. Prof Herminia Ibarra (HI) of London Business School, one of the leading thinkers in the space of transitions speaks about the notion of liminality where she says that there is a phase where you are neither here nor there and we need to be comfortable with trying a few things and letting it play out over a period of time before we pick something. She says that leaders often make a mistake of foreclosure or settling too soon for an option.

HI: *"so the two principle are you said divert and exploration and delayed commitment. Diversion and exploration is what I mean by that whenever I teach people who are in transition one of the first thing I do is I say write a list of your possible selves they don't have to be feasible they don't have to be public they have to be something you are committing to do but just relay your imagination run while what's the set of possibilities kind of brainstorming with yourself don't embarrass to write even if it is ridiculous put it in there and its really interesting work people come up and its quite in fact we are very multiple and often quite diversion does it mean you are gone do all of those things and certainly not at the same time but when you get permission to be diversion there is a lot there and in fact one of the things that is hard for people in transition is they feel that they must not be ready because they are considering such a different array of options and they feel that somehow that's wrong that they are equally passionate and excited about two things it seems mutually exclusive while get it promoted on my current firm and then starting up a business on something completely different and one day you are excited about this and the other day you are excited about that and you think you are out of your mind. But in fact what we are doing is trying to explore and compare and contrast and how I fell here and how did I feel there and so when you give yourself and that's why takes time that's why the time factor plays in to explore more divergently and say this is actually this is natural and is gives me more information so that then I can make the right choice you make better decisions and you are less likely to so the other thing the foreclosure which is take the first thing that comes to your way because it's been 6 months and I can't tell people anymore that I'm still you know out of work. So the delayed commitment comes from understanding that its gone take time and you are not gone go for the first things that comes up or the second things into you really had a chance to test because once you jump you are gone be stuck there at least another 2 years and so why not take a little longer at the beginning in order to make a robust choice."*

DJ: As we think about compounding curves and latent potential especially during transitions, it is critical that we don't measure the wrong thing too soon and look for outcomes which might take a longer period of time.

A related point came up in my conversation with the stand-up comedian Papa CJ (P.CJ), who had an MBA from Oxford and was working as a Management Consultant. He speaks about his challenges in the early stages of Stand up

P.CJ: *"I was the hardest working comedian in UK, and normally there is 500 comedians competing for the same gig, I was a kind of guy who would go anywhere, any time for no money, and a lot of shows were outside the London, so for example I would leave London at 4 o'clock in the afternoon drive to some city in the UK with the bunch of other comedians do a show there, I was nervous I wouldn't eat probably couldn't afford food that time, drive back get dropped out in the outskirts of the London at 2 o'clock in the morning, I would pay the driver my share of petrol, keeping in mind I wasn't getting*

paid for any of these shows, I would change three different buses to get back home and get home at about 4 o'clock in the morning, I did this every single day for an entire year but at the end of that year you have no money, no friends, no relationships, no life, but every single comedy promoter in country knows your name, that's where you start from"

DJ: In these situations, there is something to be said about measuring balance sheet metrics rather than P&L metrics. To take CJ's example, while he didn't have meaningful cash flows from the business in the first year, he had an asset of relationships with the ecosystem and he could build on that moving forward. Now let's get back to the conversation with James Clear.

DJ: The other statement that you make in the book which in a way captures the essence of the book right which is you don't rise to the level of your goals; you fall to the level of your systems. I thought that phrase pretty much captures the essence of the entire book. What's the insight here James and how do you see this playing out in organizations that you work with?

JC: Yeah, so I think you are right that's certainly one of the core things of the book and that phrase we do not rise to the level of our goals, we fall to the level of our systems what I am really trying to get at with that is the distinction between our desired outcomes and our daily habits because a lot of the time where it's an individual or an organization that I work with when they want to change their behaviour they often start by trying to set a larger goal, let's double revenues quarter or I want to lose certain amount of weight in the next three months or whatever it is and we think well, if I just had bigger goals, if I try and take massive action then I'll get these massive results. But the truth is the goal was actually the easy part and it's also fairly common among people in your particular industry to have the same goals. Like if a 100 people apply for a job presumably every candidate has the goal of getting the job or if 30 teams compete in the league for the same championship presumably every team has the goal of winning the championship. So, if the winners and the losers in that domain have the same goals the goal cannot be the thing that makes the difference and that doesn't mean that goals are useless, goals can be useful for setting a sense of direction, evolving clarity, understanding where you want to focus but once you understand where you want to allocate your attention and energy it's useful to put the goal on the shelf philosophically speaking and focus almost exclusively on the system. I would define the system as the collection of daily habits that you follow and take you toward particular goal. So, ultimately what we are looking for of course is to align the desired outcome, the goal, with a few daily habits, the system but whether you have the goal or not and this is why I think it's so useful to focus on the system, your habits will carry you to a place whether you want them to or not alright? So, I think, like for example, a useful question to ask yourself is can my current habits carry me to my desired future and what you find is that a lot of the time they cannot. If you just keep repeating the same habits that you have today where you end up or you want to end up and what that is getting out, what that is showing you is much more powerful the system is than the goal. Whenever a system runs it inevitably moves towards some destination and what you want is to make sure that that destination is aligned with this system that you have that your desired outcome and your daily habits are in alignment but if they are not the goal is not the thing that wins. If there is a difference between the system and the goal the system always wins.

DJ: And just talking about habits and awareness we often hear people talk about the downsides of habit because it indicates some sort of conditioning, where we lose control over our reactions but in the book you talk about building habits with awareness and you refer to the pointing and calling system that the Japanese use in the train stations. I found that absolutely fascinating and thought provoking. So, talk to us about this phenomenon and the implication for us in the way we think about cultivating habits.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: I should give you a context of where this question came from. Earlier in this podcast series, I was speaking with Devdutt Pattanaik (DP) a thinker who draws lessons from Mythology and talks about its application in daily life and in business. I happened to ask him about how we could build habits and what can we learn from Mythology. This is what he said

DP: "This concepts of habits is a western idea, habit is a bad word in Indian philosophy, another word for habit is conditioned I am conditioned to do it, conditioning there's a pavlovian response, a dog has a habit of salivating whenever the bell rings and the west has made it a virtue action without thought is habit repetitive action without thought is habit"

Indian thought is all about awareness, it's all about awareness, why are you doing what you are doing, why are you not doing what you are not doing, once you are aware then you realize what is of value to you and what is not value to you, so then breaking habits becomes difficult, there are good habits there are bad habits, habits are good or bad depending on context, so you will find people behaving, that's why I always find, when experts come to Indian they have tough time because their habits suddenly in the new context they don't know because oh my god there's no place to run, oh my god they don't have this thing because of their habit, you become like an animal and habit really goes to the lower part of your brain not the upper part of your brain and habit is about avoiding life, you do habits like it's an addiction, it's an autopilot and its addictive, like I have habit of writing, but its addiction if I don't write I get withdrawal symptoms, which means I have trained my body to be in pain when I don't do it and to get pleasure when I do it and I am not aware of it I am just doing it mechanically, so we are an awareness culture, awareness culture not habit culture"

DJ: So, as I was speaking with James Clear, who is arguably one of the leading thinkers in the field of building habits, I felt I should pressure test his thinking around habits and awareness. Let's hear what James says...

JC: Well, so the challenge, and I'll get to the story about the Japanese in a moment, the challenge is that in the beginning a habit is... so the technical definition of a habit is a behaviour that has been repeated enough times to be more or less automatic. So, things that you can do without thinking, brushing your teeth, tying your shoes etc. but in the beginning when you are building a new habit it does not occupy that automatic space; it's a very effortful conscious thing. So, the problem is that because it's not our automatic response that moment of action often passes us by and that's for building a good habit. For changing our current habits, however, they do occupy that automatic space, there is something that we do without even thinking about a lot of the time and because they are so automatic we often perform them without even realizing we are done with the action before we even notice that we did that. So, there is this method which is called pointing and calling that I think helps raise our level of awareness about our current habits and once we become aware of our habits then we can change them, and then we can start to more meaningfully adjust them. So, the story, and I actually saw this when I went to Tokyo, if you walk around Tokyo, go to a train station what you will see is this interesting pattern where when the train pulls into the station the conductor will point at like a signal and say the signal is green or the point of the speedometer and say the speedometer is 30 km an hour. Outside on the platform other employees are doing similar things, they are pointing up and down the platform and they'll say the platform is clear. The cleaning staff even as they walk on to the train in between sessions to clean it off, take the trash out and so on, they'll point at each car and say the car is clean or the trash is clear and things like that. The purpose of this is that for anybody who does the same kind of job over and over again like a train conductor pulling into the station it becomes kind of automatic, it becomes habitual. So, it's very

easy to overlook your mistakes. So, by pointing and calling by literally physically pointing and saying out loud what you are doing you are raising the level of awareness of the action. People don't use the phrase pointing and calling but you can see them do this kind of thing all the time in daily life. So, for example, I have friend who... she'll leave the garage door up accidentally some times, and so now every time she pulls out of her garage she points at the door and says garage door is down or when you are getting ready to go on a trip or leave your house for a few days you might double check everything and say I have my keys, I have my glasses, I have my wallet and you are like touching them in your pockets while you are doing that. So those are all examples of pointing and calling to try to double check, to raise the awareness, to be more aware of what you are doing and if you want you can actually use that same strategy when you are trying to build or break habits, So, for example, if you want to stop snacking when reach into the cupboard to get out a cookie or go to the pantry to get out a snack you could say, I am about to eat this cookie and I don't want to because I am trying to stop snacking and just the act of saying that out loud before you do it might be enough to prevent you from it. It sounds silly, it sounds a little like over the top to do it but it can be a very useful strategy early on so that you become more aware of your behaviour.

DJ: The other big theme you talk about in the book James is the fact that environment matters more than motivation, right? And I found that fascinating in the context of the electronic devices that often consume our attention. Talk to us a little about the crux of the insight here but more specifically how that plays out in the way for example we think about our phone home screen for example.

JC: Yeah, so environment is a huge driver of our habits and behaviour, I think, perhaps the most overlooked driver of them because we are constantly surrounded by an environment and so a lot of the times we don't even think about it but the items that are on your desk at work, the things on your kitchen counter at home, the way your living room is laid out, all of those environments influence and shape your habits to a certain degree and the same is true for your digital environment. So, the icons that are on your home screen or the way that your desktop is laid out or what tabs you have open on your web browser, all of those are pieces of the digital environment that nudge and shape and suggest certain habits and behaviours to you. So, there are a variety of things that you can do to try to optimize the environment, to build better habits but the big picture idea is you want to make the cues, the reminders, and the triggers of your good habits more obvious and make the cues of your bad habits less obvious, less visible. So, for example, if you want to watch TV less you could put it inside a wall unit or a cabinet so it's behind doors and it's hidden a little bit more. If you want to snack less you can put those snacks in a higher shelf in the pantry or in a room or a closet that you rarely open. Meanwhile, if you want to eat healthier foods you can place those in a bowl that is like very visible on the counter. When I wanted to start flossing consistently I would brush my teeth twice a day but I would only floss every now and then and so I got a little bowl and I put it right next to my toothbrush on the sink so that I could see it, put my brush on my teeth, but the toothbrush down, pick the floss up. That was basically all I needed to do to actually build that habit. I already wanted to do it; it just was tucked away in a drawer most of the time and by making it more visible in the environment I increased the odds that I was going to follow through. So, the first thing you can do is kind of increase the visibility and you can also do that with your phone. For example, when I want to build a reading habit I moved to pocket and audible which are two... a pocket lets you save articles to read for later and audible for audio books, I put those right on the home screen in the home bar so they were the first two apps that I would see every time I opened my phone. So, I made that app more visible which increased the odds that I was going to perform the reading habit. The second thing you can do to shape the environment to kind of nudge or improve your habits is to either increase the number of steps between you and the bad behaviour or decrease the number of steps between you and the good behaviour. So, basically you want to make

the good habit the path of least resistance. As an example, I have one reader, he would practice guitar and when he would come back from his guitar session, put the guitar in a case and put in the closet and so he just wouldn't see it for like a week and maybe forget to practice. But so, his new habit became I'll take my guitar, put it on the stand in the middle of the living room, pass it all the time, it's right there, it's very obvious, it's also frictionless to just pick it up and play for 5 minutes. So, now he practices all the time because it is highly visible. You can also increase the friction of a task. So, for example, if you want to watch less TV you could take the batteries off the remote control so you have to get up to turn it on manually or you could unplug the TV after each use and only plug it back in if you can say the name of the show that you want to watch. So, it's now you know you can just mindlessly turn on and find something. And those are examples of kind of increasing the friction or reducing the friction associated with a habit and the lower the friction is the more convenient it is, the more likely a habit will be performed and the higher the friction is, the more inconvenient it is, the less likely you are going to fall into that habit. So, those two strategies increasing visibility and increasing convenience by reducing friction, those are two good ways to build good habits and really structured environments of those habits are fostered rather than hindered.

DJ: And just as we wrap up this conversation James. You also talk about the notion of a two-minute rule or a gateway habit that often is the sort of the door that opens us into a path of building multiple other habits. So, talk to us a little bit about the concept here, why this is important and what are some of the gateway habits that you see people using to build other habits?

JC: Yeah, this is a great place to finish because the two-minute rule I think is a really good place to start if you are looking for one takeaway what should I do with this information, this is a really good place to start. So, the two-minute rule says take whatever habit you are trying to build and scale it down to something that takes two minutes or less to do. So, read 40 books a year becomes read one page or do yoga 4 days a week becomes take out my yoga mat and sometimes when I say that people resist a little bit because you are like okay, I know the real goal isn't just to take my yoga mat out like I know I actually want to do the workout. So, if it's this mental trick and I know it's a trick like why I would fall for it. Then if you feel that way, I understand that but I would suggest for the first day or the first week actually force yourself to stop after two minutes. So, I tell this story of a reader named Mitch and I mentioned this in the book and he ended up losing a lot of weight, 100 pounds, so 40 kilograms or something like that and when he went to the gym for the first time he wasn't allowed to stay for longer than 5 minutes. So, he would show up at the gym, work out for... do half an exercise, get back in the car, drive home and it sounds silly, right, it sounds ridiculous because you are like this is not going to get the guy the results that he wants but what you realize if you step back is that he was mastering the art of showing up, he was becoming the type of person that went to the gym 4 days a week even if it was only for 5 minutes. And this I think is a much deeper truth about habits that's often overlooked which is a habit must be established before it can be improved, right, you have to make it the standard in your life, make it the new normal before you can worry about optimizing it or expanding it from there and so often we are focused on finding the perfect business idea, the best work out program, the ideal diet plan, we are so focused on optimizing that we don't give ourselves permission to show up even if it is just in a small way. But if you can't master the art of showing up there is no raw material to work with, there is nothing to optimize. So, the two-minute rule really helps you get over that hurdle, it helps you master the art of showing up, start building a habit even if it's small and then you have somewhere to gain a foothold, then you have something to push off rather than expand into and for that reason I think it's a really valuable strategy to use when you are trying to get started with a new habit.

DJ: James, we could go on for another one hour on this, there is so much to explore but I am mindful of time, so thank you so much for making time on the podcast James and really enjoyed the conversation.

JC: Yeah, of course, thank you so much for having me.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: Thank you for listening. I hope you found the conversation purposeful. As we embark on our journey in 2020, trust this gave you some thoughts to mull over as you go about baking habits and building systems. I also realize that this is a topic that is easy to get cognitively but difficult to implement in daily life. But there is a lot we can learn from people's stories and struggles around some of these themes. So, here is a suggestion. Why don't we learn from each other and raise our game.

Please email your responses to the following 3 topics to deepakj.p2p@transitioninsight.com with the subject "Stories around habits". I will anonymise the stories and share what I collect with the people that write in! We could hopefully learn from each other!

3 topics that you could write about are

- 1) A Pointing and Calling system that has worked for you in conducting a habit with awareness
- 2) A 2 minute rule or a gateway habit that might have worked for you in a certain context
- 3) A situation where you had to grind through the plateau of latent potential

I repeat

- 1) A Pointing and Calling system that has worked for you in conducting a habit with awareness
- 2) A 2 minute rule or a gateway habit that might have worked for you in a certain context
- 3) A situation where you had to grind through the plateau of latent potential

Do use the subject "Stories around habits" and send the email to deepakj.p2p@transitioninsight.com.

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Signing off, this is Deepak Jayaraman. To know more about the Advisory work I do, please visit the About the Host section at playtopotential.com.

Have a wonderful 2020 and look forward to you tuning into some of the subsequent conversations at the Play to Potential Podcast.

End of nugget transcription

Nugget from Atul Kasbekar that is referenced: [Entrepreneurial pursuits beyond photography.](#)

Nugget from Herminia Ibarra that is referenced: [Transitioning from well-paying time-greedy careers.](#)

Nugget from Herminia Ibarra that is referenced: [The perils of foreclosure.](#)

Nugget from Papa CJ that is referenced: [Plunging into Stand-Up.](#)

Nugget from Devdutt Pattanaik that is referenced: [Building Habits vs. Enhancing Awareness.](#)

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James Clear - Nuggets

- 52.00 James Clear - The Full Conversation
- 52.01 James Clear - Journey to studying habits
- 52.02 James Clear - Building habits in the right areas
- 52.03 James Clear - Keeping the identity small
- 52.04 James Clear - Plateau of latent potential
- 52.05 James Clear - Systems versus Goals
- 52.06 James Clear - Building habits with awareness
- 52.07 James Clear - Environment and habits
- 52.08 James Clear - 2 minute rule - the gateway habit

About Deepak Jayaraman

Deepak seeks to unlock human potential of senior executive's / leadership teams by working with them as an Executive Coach / Sounding Board / Transition Advisor. You can know more about his work [here](#).

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