Context to the nugget

James speaks about how environment plays such a critical part in the building and breaking of habits. He speaks about how we can increase the friction in the negative habits that we want to get rid of and decrease the resistance in the positive habits we are trying to create. This is all the more important in the context of how we relate to our digital devices where it is easy for us to go down a rabbit hole very quickly

Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (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.

James Clear (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.

Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: In a way this ties back to the work of Richard Thaler, the economist who won the Nobel Prize for his thinking around the notion of Nudge. Linking it back to what James says, I guess it is key for us to design our environment in a way that we nudge ourselves towards a positive habit that we want to build or nudge us away from a negative habit that we want to break. Let me share a couple of small examples from my life.

1)   First - I have a standing desk in my office in addition to my chair. This ensures that I spend X number of hours standing every day by default given that my work could be sedentary if I am based in the office. Once I am standing, it ensures that I move, walk around and stretch my limbs every now and then. But I find that it is a lot more natural now than it was when I didn't have a standing desk. Despite the best of my intentions, I would get consumed by work and end up spending long periods of time sitting. So this standing desk has helped me build this positive habit of standing for a minimum number of hours a day

2)   Second – if you have listened to a few conversations at the podcast, you might appreciate that it requires quite a bit of editing. Breaking a conversation into nuggets and cross-referencing conversations does take quite a bit of time and this requires deep work. On the days, I want to edit the podcast; I just leave the phone at home and come to office so that I can give it the time and focus. I realize that if the phone is in front of me, I will invariable look at it and start a milk-run of checking social media to see if the world has changed in the last three and a half minutes. But leaving the phone at home has increased the friction for me and ensures that I am able to do the deep work to do justice to the editing process of the podcast.

These are just a couple of examples from my end, but I'm sure you have your stories too. But I agree with James. We often overestimate our will power and underestimate the power of the environment around us to dictate our behaviour.

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End of nugget transcription

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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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