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## Context to the conversation

Katy speaks about what it takes to build a robust habit. She speaks about two archetypes – Flexible Fernando and Robust Rachels to illustrate the point. She goes on to say that Fernandos end up building a habit that is likely to stick despite the vagaries of real life as compared to Rachels (any gender related themes are just a mere coincidence!). She expands on this topic here.

## Transcription

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Deepak Jayaraman (DJ): And moving to a different theme, Katy, in this podcast earlier, I was speaking with Tom Vanderbilt who has written a book called *Beginners*, where he speaks about how young infants learn to walk. And he actually goes on to say the real meaning of the term baby steps is not just taking small steps, but it is taking steps in different variety of conditions. And babies actually randomize a lot of the movements and try walking in different situations to build a walking habit. And you say something similar in the context of, you know, to use your words, Routine Rachels and Flexible Fernandos, and you actually say that the climate in which we form a habit, there needs to be a certain variation for it to stick. So can you talk a little bit about the nuance here?

Katy Milkman (KM): Yeah. No, I love that you brought that up too. Um, the age-old wisdom on habits is that you want to repeat the same behavior in a really consistent way, sort of, you need to find a cue, like a time of day or a location, where you always perform this behavior and, as much consistency as you can create around its performance, the better, then you perform the behavior, you reward it and you repeat, and the more often you do that, the stronger routine or a habit you will build. And I did the study that, I thought, would get at that. It was a study where we are trying to build exercise habits, actually among Google employees, about 2,500 of them who wanted to create habits around the start of a new year, fresh start effect. And we either coach them to engage in the behavior, in this case, exercise and we paid them, we rewarded them for it, either in a really consistent way, like, same time of day whenever they did it, or we encouraged more variety in the way that they engaged in that behavior. So over the course of a month, some people basically are coached to go to the gym always at the same time and ended up making about 85% of their workouts at a consistent time that they had planned in advance, let us say, 7 a.m. if, you know, for a person in our example, was there ideal time, 85% of our workouts over the course of this month are at 7 a.m. then. And another group of people also pick their ideal time, but they are encouraged to go whenever they want. And as a result, about half of their gym visits end up being at their ideal time, let us say 7:00 a.m., the other half are at other times. So the question we were interested in is this month ends, we have helped people train up a habit or we tried to, but whose habit will be stickier. If both groups go at the same rate, will it be the people who were mostly visiting the gym at the same time or people who had more variety in when they did it? We expected actually it would be better to have more consistency that that would build a more consistent habit, but when we

analyzed the data, what we found is we were wrong. So, two people, they have gone to the gym in equal frequency for a month but in different patterns. One is going at the same time all the time, the other is going all over the place, you know, at different times. We see the person who has more variety, ends up going more after this month ends. And the reason is really simple, it turns out in our data, the people who had been going really at the same time over and over again, had formed a really rigid routine. So they were actually a little bit more likely to go with their 7 a.m. gym time, the time that was best for them on average at the end of this period. So they had formed a habit around that but if they did not go then, they did not go at all. So something comes up, I miss my 7 a.m. workout, I throw up my hands, I cannot make it, I miss my 7 a.m. workout, that is it. The people who have been more flexible and when they went to the gym, sometimes they went at 7, sometimes went at 5, they go a little bit less at 7 a.m. at their usual time after this month-long habit, building period ends, but if they miss their 7 a.m. workout, they still get to the gym. So they go at noon or they go it 5 and net-net, they actually have built a more robust habit. So this was really surprising to us. What we were expecting is that that consistency would build habit and what we found is it was actually rigidity that we are building and the flexibility proved so important to getting the thing done that you are trying to do on a regular basis and that we need to have flexible habits. So a first best time to go in a back-up plan is what really proved to be important for getting through this particular goal. And I think there is many goals like that. If you think about exercise or meditation or language practice or whatever it is you are trying to do on a regular basis, that if you can build flexibility into a routine, that, net-net, may be a much better way to make sure the thing gets done than a really rigid routine.

## Reflections from Deepak Jayaraman

DJ: To provide a little bit of context to the question that I asked Katy, this is the extract from my conversation with Tom Vanderbilt (TV) where he speaks about how Babies learn to walk. We sometimes spend a lot of time talking about a certain number of reps to build a habit. But we forget to pay attention to whether we are building a robust habit or if it is brittle. Here is Tom speaking about this piece of insight.

TV: *“so, I went to New York University something called the Infant Action Lab and one of the things they study quite a bit is how babies learn to move and there is a process they go through where they will first just try to sit up a little bit then they might start crawling doing these various half crawling, then they will try to make this move toward walking and it is very interesting in terms of a learning process because they sort of violate a lot of the things you hear about, they don’t really have a specific timetable in mind or a goal. When researchers have tried to figure out where babies are even walking to they really can’t identify, they seem to be just be walking for the sheer pleasure of walking and to practice it in a sense because... and there’s even some question as why babies learn to walk when they can really often get around pretty well by crawling and in a sense learning to walk it provides that much more learning opportunity because you can see more of the world, you can reach other destinations, you can interact more directly with a caregiver. So, I almost think there’s a larger hunger for learning they are growing on and importantly we don’t give babies drills in how to walk or exercises. We just sort of leave them in a room in the house and they try it on their own and through this process of just simply trying and there are a lot of... speaking of 10,000 hours I mean it takes five years or so to become a proficient walker. So, there’s clearly a lot of work that goes on even though we have sort of forgotten about that but as part of that there’s an immense failure rate. The research that I spoke to you had filmed babies falling 30 or 40 or even up to 70 times in an hour while trying to walk and then they would simply shrug it off and get up and start walking again. And so, there’s something about... and their whole practice of learning is very sort of seems very random and playful*

*and experimental and they are not, they are never really trying the same thing twice because that wouldn't be a good way to learn for them because walking is often not the same thing, moving around, and there's a famous Russian movement scientist named Nikolai Bernstein who called it repetition without repetition and this means when you are trying to solve something like walking or how to juggle you don't simply want to do the same thing all the time, because that is a very brittle practice."*

DJ: Thankyou for listening. For more please visit [playtopotential.com](http://playtopotential.com). If you want to tune into the conversation with Tom Vanderbilt which is go to [playtopotential.com](http://playtopotential.com) and look for Tom in the guest section.

## End of nugget transcription

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Nugget from Tom Vanderbilt that is referenced: [Real meaning of baby steps](#).

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## Katy Milkman - Nuggets

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### **About Deepak Jayaraman**

Deepak seeks to unlock the 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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