

Habits – Good, Bad, and Mundane (Part 1)

Category General Series **Date** June 23, 2008

I recall my freshman year in college when I'd walk down the hallway of my dormitory building as I made my way to, and from, class every weekday. It was always an interesting walk—as I glanced momentarily, through the open doorways, into the rooms of my floor mates. But, no worries—it was an all-male dormitory building. Recall I said I was a freshman! It was, and still is, customary to walk by and say hello to your friends and peers. However, this routine afforded me the opportunity to capture certain observations—one that almost every college / university student will attest to. I observed the condition of my dormitory mates' rooms—and boy did it vary. A few rooms were very neat and tidy, while another few were nothing short of a pig style. Majority of the rooms that I observed were somewhere in between, of course. Some of my colleagues had a habit of being very clean, neat and tidy. Others had no concept of cleanliness or tidiness and simply saw their room condition as normal. There were several occasions when two roommates had opposing habits and the evidence was glaringly obvious—one half of the room was very inviting and the other half was...well, you can imagine it!

We all have habits, many of which are observable by other people around us. Many of these habits can be grouped into various categories—dressing habits, gesture habits, talking habits, eating habits, travel habits, and many other lifestyle groups of habits. Some of these groups of habits are rooted in tradition, ethnic culture, or spiritual beliefs. The reality is that an overwhelming majority of our habits are mundane—practices that take up time and/or space, and may provide significant, little, or no value to us. However, many people also possess personal habits—some of which are not necessarily mundane in nature. Some of these are good—practices that serve us well and/or benefit others around us; other personal habits are just plain bad—practices that do not serve us or others well in any significant way, shape, or form.

But first, what is a habit? A habit is a routine or a practice—an activity that you perform repeatedly and frequently over time to the point where it becomes automatic or effortless. For this reason a habit is something you cultivate—it does not just appear out of nowhere. Cultivation takes time, effort, and sometimes a lot of energy. For example, a competitive athlete, with the guidance of a coach or trainer, practices drills and routines over many weeks and months for the sole purpose of sharpening certain skills and ultimately elevating his or her performance. These practices lead to a set of habits that result in performance.

For most adults an existing personal habit was cultivated at a younger age. We often find that many of the habits we maintain in

our adult years were cultivated while we were young children. Some habits are easy to break, or stop, while others are very difficult to break. In fact, there is a direct correlation—relationship—between the length of time spent cultivating a habit and the degree of

Value System

Your value system is a psychological (mental) process that you use to assign value (and priorities) to people and things around you.

Your value system shapes your personal values and core principles.

difficulty it takes to break the habit. Much of all this is not new; however, there is a nexus—a connection—between habits and the topic of respect!

In my book—*Respect: Gaining It and Sustaining It*—I illustrate how your value system is the common thread that relates the three distinct categories of respect that you command. Your value system is also the mechanism that shapes your personal values—and your core principles. Our personal values—all of them—have one thing in common; they were taught and reinforced. And how were they reinforced? Through habits!

So, do personal habits matter? You better believe that they do. Some personal habits reinforce values and behavior that serve us well and enable us to command respect, while other personal habits reinforce the wrong values and bad behavior or simply undermine values and behavior that would otherwise serve us well. In the late 1980's Steven R. Covey published a book—*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*—which went on to become a mega bestseller. The subject of his book appropriately referred to habits—practices that one cultivates and performs continuously—for achieving effectiveness, a major hallmark of performance and leadership.

What are some of your personal habits? Most of us see a doctor annually for a medical checkup. We do this to ensure our continued good health or to diagnose and treat a medical problem. However, many people do not take time to review their long held personal habits—myself included, until recently. A close review of our personal habits may reveal or uncover practices that we engage and that may be undermining strong values that we hold dear and (values) that serve us well. A close review might also cast attention to recently cultivated habits that may be negatively impacting some of our valued relationships—family relationships, workplace relationships, social relationships, and spiritual relationships. These negative effects will surely lead to devaluation at some level, hence a loss of respect. Respect is indeed a measure of valuation, as presented in my book.

What closely held values or core principles do your strongest personal habits reinforce, or undermine? This self-assessment may be worth considering. Let me share an interesting story, in closing.

Laura and Peter are a couple living in a neighboring town to a major city. They've been married about 8 years and have two young children—Michael, a 7 year old and Mariah, a 5 year old.

The couple maintains a medium sized two-bedroom rented apartment condominium where they've lived for about six years. They had moved there soon after Michael was born to take advantage of the larger space and to better prepare for the arrival of their second child—Mariah. The all-brick condominium complex features many amenities—a club house function facility, a workout gym, an outdoor swimming pool, and more. Through hard work and dedication, they had both pursued their respective careers—Laura, as a senior accountant with an accounting firm and Peter, as an assistant field services manager at the neighboring downtown branch office of the telephone company. Their joint income afforded them the opportunity to live comfortably and plan a good life for their family.

After two long years of financial discipline and planning Laura and Peter had finally saved enough money to purchase their first home. This had been a life-long dream of

Laura's who looked forward to owning a house and creating a wonderful home for her family; and now the search for that house was about to begin.

Working with a real estate agent, and a friend, they began the long and exciting process of visiting and assessing houses in various neighborhoods within their town and adjacent smaller towns. The visits were truly a family affair—with Mariah and Michael alongside every step of the way. A month and twenty house visits later, Laura and Peter narrowed their choice to two houses that offered much of their needs and requirements. Laura preferred a yellow four-bedroom colonial that sported an exercise room that the current owners had built and were offering, complete with exercise equipment. "What a deal!" thought Laura, a fitness maniac. Her weekly habit of working out in their condo gym prompted her to choose this yellow beauty. She would continue to enjoy her fitness regimen right here in her own home!

Peter, on the other hand, favored a blue four-bedroom contemporary that featured a large landscape and an outdoor pool. Peter's passion for swimming along with his desire to entertain pool-side BBQ festivities with friends and family steered him in the direction of the pool-side contemporary. However, this was not going to happen unless he could win Laura over. It was now decision time and neither Peter nor Laura was willing to resign to the other.

To be continued in Part 2.

About the Author



Niyi Taiwo is the founder of EKTIMIS and the lead editor for the EKTIMIS eLibrary articles. He is the author of several books, including the EKTIMIS Top Ten Laws series. He is a continuous improvement expert with over 21 years of industry experience – operational, management and consulting. He holds an undergraduate degree from WPI and a master's degree from RPI. He is a certified Lean Expert and an ASQ-certified Six Sigma Black Belt.