Chapter 18

FLOW

The Genius of Routine

Routine, in an intelligent man, is a sign of ambition.
—W. H. Auden

For years before the Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps won the gold at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, he followed the same routine at every race. He arrived two hours early.[1] He stretched and loosened up, according to a precise pattern: eight hundred mixer, fifty freestyle, six hundred kicking with kickboard, four hundred pulling a buoy, and more. After the warm-up he would dry off, put in his earphones, and sit—never lie down—on the massage table. From that moment, he and his coach, Bob Bowman, wouldn't speak a word to each other until after the race was over.

At forty-five minutes before the race he would put on his race suit. At thirty minutes he would get into the warm-up pool and do six hundred to eight hundred meters. With ten minutes to go he would walk to the ready room. He would find a seat alone, never next to anyone. He liked to keep the seats on both sides of him clear for his things: goggles on one side and his towel on the other. When his race was called he would walk to the blocks. There he would do what he always did: two stretches, first a straight-leg stretch and then with a bent knee. Left leg first every time. Then the right earbud would come out. When his name was called, he would take out the left earbud. He would step onto the block—always from the left side. He would dry the block—every time. Then he would stand and flap his arms in such a way that his hands hit his back.

Phelps explains: “It’s just a routine. My routine. It’s the routine I’ve gone through my whole life. I’m not going to change it.” And that is that. His coach, Bob Bowman, designed this physical routine with Phelps. But that’s not all. He also gave Phelps a routine for what to think about as he went to sleep and first thing when he awoke. He called it “Watching the Videotape.”[2] There was no actual tape, of course. The “tape” was a visualization of the perfect race. In exquisite detail and slow motion Phelps would visualize every moment from his starting position on top of the blocks, through each stroke, until he emerged from the pool, victorious, with water dripping off his face.

Phelps didn’t do this mental routine occasionally. He did it every day before he went to bed and every day when he woke up—for years. When Bob wanted to challenge him in practices he would shout, “Put in the videotape!” and Phelps would push beyond his limits. Eventually the mental routine was so deeply ingrained that Bob barely had to whisper the phrase, “Get the videotape ready,” before a race. Phelps was always ready to “hit play.”

When asked about the routine, Bowman said: “If you were to ask Michael what’s going on in his head before competition, he would say he’s not really thinking about anything. He’s just following the program. But that’s not right. It’s more like his habits have taken over. When the race arrives, he’s more than halfway through his plan and he’s been victorious at every step. All the stretches went like he planned. The warm-up laps were just like he visualized. His headphones are playing exactly what he expected. The actual race is just another step in a pattern that started earlier that day and has been nothing but victories. Winning is a natural extension.”[3]

As we all know, Phelps won the record eight gold medals at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. When visiting Beijing, years after Phelps’s breathtaking accomplishment, I couldn’t help but think about how Phelps and the other Olympians make all these feats of amazing athleticism seem so effortless. Of course Olympic athletes arguably practice longer and train harder than any other athletes in the world—but when they get in that pool, or on that track, or onto that rink, they make it look positively easy. It’s more than just a natural extension of their training. It's a testament to the genius of the right routine.

The way of the Nonessentialist is to think the essentials only get done when they are forced. That execution is a matter of raw effort alone. You labor to make it happen. You push through.

The way of the Essentialist is different. The Essentialist designs a routine that makes achieving what you have identified as essential the default position. Yes, in some instances an Essentialist still has to work hard, but with the right routine in place each effort yields exponentially greater results.

Nonessentialist	**Essentialist**
Tries to execute the essentials by force	Designs a routine that enshrines what is essential, making execution almost effortless
Allows nonessentials to be the default	Makes the essential the default position

Making It Look Easy

Routine is one of the most powerful tools for removing obstacles. Without routine, the pull of nonessential distractions will overpower us. But if we create a routine that enshrines the essentials, we will begin to execute them on autopilot. Instead of our consciously pursuing the essential, it will happen without our having to think about it. We won't have to expend precious energy every day prioritizing everything. We must simply expend a small amount of initial energy to create the routine, and then all that is left to do is follow it.

There is a huge body of scientific research to explain the mechanism by which routine enables difficult things to become easy. One simplified explanation is that as we repeatedly do a certain task the neurons, or nerve cells, make new connections through communication gateways called "synapses." With repetition, the connections strengthen and it becomes easier for the brain to activate them. For example, when you learn a new word it takes several repetitions at various intervals for the word to be mastered. To recall the word later you will need to activate the same synapses until eventually you know the word without consciously thinking about it.[4]

A similar process explains how when we drive from point A to point B every day we can eventually make the journey without consciously thinking about it, or why once we've cooked the same meal a few times we no longer have to consult the recipe, or why any mental task gets easier and easier each time we attempt it. With repetition the routine is mastered and the activity becomes second nature.

Our ability to execute the essential improves with practice, just like any other ability. Think about the first time you had to perform a certain critical function at work. At first you felt like a novice. You probably felt unsure and awkward. The effort to focus drained your willpower. Decision fatigue set in. You were probably easily distracted. This is perfectly normal. But once you performed the function over and over, you gained confidence. You were no longer sidetracked. You were able to perform the function better and faster, and with less concentration and effort. This power of a routine grows out of our brain's ability to take over entirely until the process becomes fully unconscious.

There is another cognitive advantage to routine as well. Once the mental work shifts to the basal ganglia, mental space is freed up to concentrate on something new. This allows us to autopilot the execution of one essential activity while simultaneously actively engaging in another, without sacrificing our level of focus or contribution. "In fact, the brain starts working less and less," says Charles Duhigg, author of the book *The Power of Habit*. "The brain can almost completely shut down.… And this is a real advantage, because it means you have all of this mental activity you can devote to something else."[5]

To some, routine can sound like where creativity and innovation go to die—the ultimate exercise in boredom. We even use the word as a synonym for *pallid* and *bland*, as in "It has just become *routine* for me." And routines can indeed become this—the wrong routines. But the right routines can actually enhance innovation and creativity by giving us the equivalent of an energy rebate. Instead of spending our limited supply of discipline on making the same decisions again and again, embedding our decisions into our routine allows us to channel that discipline toward some other essential activity.

The work Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has done on creativity demonstrates how highly creative people use strict routines to free up their minds. "Most creative individuals find out early what their best rhythms are for sleeping, eating, and working, and abide by them even when it is tempting to do otherwise," Mihaly says. "They wear clothes that are comfortable, they interact only with people they find congenial, they do only things they think are important. Of course, such idiosyncrasies are not endearing to those they have to deal with.… But personalizing patterns of action helps to free the mind from the expectations that make demands on attention and allows intense concentration on matters that count.”[6]

One CEO in one of Silicon Valley’s most innovative companies has what at first glance would seem like a boring, creativity-killing routine. He holds a three-hour meeting that starts at 9:00 A.M. one day a week. It is *never* missed. It is never rescheduled at a different time. It is mandatory—so much so that even in this global firm all the executives know never to schedule any travel that will conflict with the meeting. If it is 9:00 A.M. on Monday, every person will be there. It is a discipline. At first blush there is nothing particularly unique about this. But what *is* unique is the quality of ideas that come out of this regular meeting. Because the CEO has eliminated the mental cost involved in planning the meeting or thinking about who will or won’t be there, people can focus on the creative problem solving. And indeed, his team makes coming up with creative, inventive ideas and solutions look natural and easy.

The Power of the *Right* Routine

According to researchers at Duke University, nearly 40 percent of our choices are deeply unconscious.[7] We don't think about them in the usual sense. There is both danger and opportunity in this. The opportunity is that we can develop new abilities that eventually become instinctive. The danger is that we may develop routines that are counterproductive. Without being fully aware, we can get caught in nonessential habits—like checking our e-mail the second we get out of bed every morning, or picking up a doughnut on the way home from work each day, or spending our lunch hour trolling the Internet instead of using the time to think, reflect, recharge, or connect with friends and colleagues. So how can we discard the routines that keep us locked in nonessential habits and replace them with routines that make executing essentials almost effortless?

OVERHAUL YOUR TRIGGERS

Most of us have a behavioral habit we want to change, whether it's to eat less junk food, waste less time, or worry less. But when we try, we find that changing even the simplest, tiniest habit is amazingly, disturbingly hard. There seems to be a gravitational force pulling us inexorably back to the warm embrace of those French fries, that Web site with the pictures of the goofy cats, or the spiral of worry about things outside our control. How do we resist the powerful pull of these habits?

In an interview about his book *The Power of Habit* Charles Duhigg said "in the last 15 years, as we've learned how habits work and how they can be changed, scientists have explained that every habit is made up of a cue, a routine, and a reward. The cue is a trigger that tells your brain to go into automatic mode and which habit to use. Then there is the routine—the behavior itself—which can be physical or mental or emotional. Finally, there is a reward, which helps your brain figure out if this particular habit is worth remembering for the future. Over time, this loop—cue, routine, reward; cue, routine, reward—becomes more automatic as the cue and reward become neurologically intertwined."[8]

What this means is that if we want to change our routine, we don't really need to change the behavior. Rather, we need to find the *cue* that is triggering the nonessential activity or behavior and find a way to associate that same cue with something that *is* essential. So, for example, if the bakery you pass on the way home from work triggers you to pick up a doughnut, next time you pass by that bakery, use that cue to remind you to pick up a salad from the deli across the street. Or if your alarm clock going off in the morning triggers you to check your e-mail, use it as a cue to get up and read instead. At first, overcoming the temptation to stop at the bakery or check the e-mail will be difficult. But each time you execute the new behavior—each time you pick up the salad—strengthens the link in your brain between the cue and the new behavior, and soon, you'll be *subconsciously and automatically* performing the new routine.

CREATE NEW TRIGGERS

If the goal is to create some behavioral change, we're not just confined to our existing cues; we can create brand-new ones to trigger the execution of some essential routine. I used this technique to develop the daily routine of writing in a journal, and it worked wonders for me. For a long time I wrote in my journal only sporadically. I would put it off all day; then at night I would rationalize, "I will do it in the morning." But inevitably I wouldn't, and then by the next night I had two days' worth to write and it was overwhelming. So I put it off again. And so on. Then I heard someone say he had developed a routine of writing a few lines at the exact same time each day. This seemed like a manageable habit, but I knew that I would need some cue reminding me to write at the specified time each day or I would continue to put it off as I'd been doing. So I started putting my journal in my bag right next to my phone. That way, when I pull my phone out of my bag to charge it each evening (already a well-established habit) I see the journal, and this cues me to write in it. Now it is instinctive. Natural. I look forward to it. It has been ten years now and I have almost never missed a day.

DO THE MOST DIFFICULT THING FIRST

Ray Zinn is the founder and CEO of Micrel, a semiconductor business in Silicon Valley. He is a contrarian in lots of ways. He is seventy-five years old in an industry and city that usually celebrates twenty-year-old college dropouts. In 1978 he and his business partner invested $300,000 to launch the company and it has been profitable every single year, since inception (except for one year when they consolidated two manufacturing facilities). Since going public, their stock price has never fallen below its IPO price. Ray credits this success to their highly disciplined focus on profitability. He has led the company as CEO for thirty-five years, and throughout that period Ray has followed an extraordinarily consistent routine. He wakes up at 5:30 A.M. every single morning, including Saturday and Sunday (as he's done for more than fifty years). He then exercises for an hour. He eats breakfast at 7:30 A.M. and arrives at work at 8:15 A.M. Dinner is at 6:30 P.M. with his family. Bedtime is 10:00 P.M. But what really enables Ray to operate at his highest level of contribution is that throughout the day, his routine is governed by a single rule: "Focus on the hardest thing first." After all, as Ray said to me: "We already have too much to think about. Why not eliminate some of them by establishing a routine?"

Use the tips above to develop a routine of doing your hardest task in the day first thing in the morning. Find a cue—whether it's that first glass of orange juice you have at your desk, or an alarm you set on your cell phone, or anything you're already accustomed to doing first thing in the morning—to trigger you to sit down and focus on your hardest thing.

MIX UP YOUR ROUTINES

It's true that doing the same things at the same time, day after day, can get boring. To avoid this kind of routine fatigue, there's no reason why you can't have different routines for different days of the week. Jack Dorsey, the cofounder of Twitter and founder of Square, has an interesting approach to his weekly routine. He has divided up his week into themes. Monday is for management meetings and "running the company" work. Tuesday is for product development. Wednesday is for marketing, communications, and growth. Thursday is for developers and partnerships. Friday is for the company and its culture.[9] This routine helps to provide calmness amid the chaos of a high-growth start-up. It enables him to focus his energy on a single theme each day instead of feeling pulled into everything. He adheres to this routine each week, no exceptions, and over time people learn this about him and can organize meetings and requests around it.

TACKLE YOUR ROUTINES ONE BY ONE

It would be unfortunate to become so taken with the genius of routine that we'd be tempted to try to overhaul multiple routines at the same time. But as we learned in the last chapter, to get big results we must start small. So start with one change in your daily or weekly routine and then build on your progress from there.

I don't want to imply that any of this is easy. Many of our nonessential routines are deep and emotional. They have been formed in the furnace of some strong emotions. The idea that we can just snap our fingers and replace them with a new one is naive. Learning essential new skills is never easy. But once we master them and make them automatic we have won an enormous victory, because the skill remains with us for the rest of our lives. The same is true with routines. Once they are in place they are gifts that keep on giving.