

Creating Habits for Success: Five Strategies for Staying On-Track

By Michelle LaBrosse, CCPM, PMP®, PMI-ACP, Chief Cheetah and Founder of Cheetah Learning

What habits do you need to develop to become a more effective Project Manager? Maybe you need to get more organized with your paperwork, or change how you spend your time each day to stay on-track with your projects, or shift how you respond to stressful situations. Regardless of the kind of habit you're trying to form, you might find that changing your day-to-day behavior is more challenging than you expected. It may be the case that you've tried before to adopt this new habit, but somehow got derailed from your goal.

For this month's Know How Network, we'll be discussing the best recent research on habits: what it takes to form a new habit, and what to do if you find yourself straying from your planned course of action. This research doesn't just apply to Project Management; in my own life, I recently undertook a major project to adopt a new habit: increasing my own self-acceptance. I did this by taking on a challenge over 66 days to love myself more. I was inspired to do this based on an interaction with my daughter, a recently minted registered dietician. I had tired of well meaning "professionals" lecturing me on my weight. But instead of changing how they interacted with me (an impossible task), I decided to change how I viewed myself. After all, it was me who had the issue with them, not vice versa. It worked - I now feel much more favorably about myself and do not personalize "expert" advice, as it's just someone else's opinion.

Before you can change any habit, you need to first know what habits you would like to adopt. For example, if you'd like to become a more effective Project Manager, what habit would you like to adopt to help you achieve this? Frame this in the positive rather than negative. For example, if you want to stop giving your employees overly negative feedback, re-frame this as, "I want to give my employees five times more positive feedback as negative feedback, every day." This re-framing makes it easier for you to recognize your progress in developing this habit, rather than only criticizing yourself for slipping up.

Next, follow these five strategies for developing a new habit:

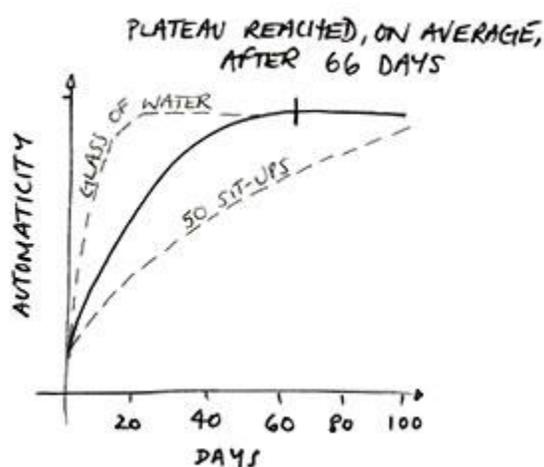
Set up your environment for success. Let's say that the habit you want to adopt is to complete your most important task for the day before you do any other work ([this is a habit of the most effective Project Managers](#)). What changes could you make in your environment to facilitate this habit? You may find, for example, that even if you wake up fully intending to complete your most important task first, other tasks come up that distract you from your goal. After spending an hour responding to emails that came in early in the morning, you'll realize you've been derailed from your purpose and have been sucked into helping resolve other people's problems.

Making a few simple changes in your environment can help prevent this situation. At the end of each work day, figure out the most important task you need to complete the next work day and what you'll need to complete it, and then get these supplies ready. Close the email tab in your browser (yes, really!), and set a reminder on your phone for the next morning to remind yourself to silence all notifications. Unless it is absolutely imperative that you check your email first thing in the morning, you will likely have more success with adopting your habit of doing the most important task first if you concentrate on this for the first half hour of your day.

Don't despair if you mess up once or twice. Especially when the habits we're trying to adopt are challenging, it is unrealistic to think that once we've committed to adopting them, we'll practice them every day without fail. [Research shows that missing a day does not, in fact, have a significant impact on your ability to adopt a new habit.](#) The crucial thing is to recover from the slip-up - fast. Missing one day is

acceptable, but stretching this into five days will likely hurt your ability to make your new habit part of your automatic daily activity. Leave slip-ups in the past, and focus instead on what you have to gain by sticking with your goal of developing a new habit.

Be patient if the new habit still feels like a chore, even months later. [Psychologist Jeremy Dean](#) conducted original research on what it takes to make new habits and break old ones, and found that to do either almost always takes longer than the commonly-held perception of 21 days. Getting to the point where practicing a new habit (or losing an old one) feels automatic, he found, takes an average of 66 days. While adopting a simpler habit (like drinking water every day) may take less time, more complex or challenging habits (he gives the example of doing 50 sit-ups each morning) will likely take 80 or more days before they feel automatic.



In learning theory, a habit is called “procedural knowledge” - this is where a skilled behavior becomes automatic. I like to use the example of learning how to drive a car. At first, you must think of every step of the process, but after a few months of practice, you do not have to consciously think about each step to create the results you desire (like driving from point A to point B). If you question the the 21 days versus 66 days theory, think about getting in the car with someone who has been driving for 3 weeks versus 2 months. Who do you think will have better driving habits?

Tell others about your new habit. This is also called “accountability.” For the purpose of creating a new habit, though, it’s not necessary to have a partner or group that *really* holds you accountable; what matters is that other people know about the habit you’re trying to develop, and will know if you break it. Just being aware that others will know if you don’t keep up with your habit is sufficient motivation for many people to stick with their goals.

Finally, celebrate small victories. Beating yourself up for missing a day or two in the practice of your new habit is more likely to be more de-motivating than it is to be motivating. A better strategy is to keep track of how many days you’ve successfully carried out your new daily habit and reflect on what you’ve gained by adopting this habit. If the gains from adopting your new habit are less immediate (as in a diet), you can further motivate yourself to stick with your habit by setting up intermittent rewards for yourself - so long as you choose a reward that doesn’t break the habit! Over time, as your habit becomes a more automatic part of your daily activity, the rewards become less necessary.

Following these tips will significantly increase the likelihood that you'll successfully adopt your new habit to become a more effective Project Manager. And, as with all important projects, the best time to start is NOW. To learn more about Cheetah Learning's online courses designed to help Project Managers develop more effective management habits, visit www.cheetahlearning.com.

About the Author:



Michelle LaBrosse, PMP, is an entrepreneurial powerhouse with a penchant for making success easy, fun, and fast. She is the founder of [Cheetah Learning](http://www.cheetahlearning.com), the author of the Cheetah Success Series, and a prolific [blogger](#) whose mission is to bring Project Management to the masses.

Cheetah Learning is a virtual company with 100 employees, contractors, and licensees worldwide. To date, more than 50,000 people have become “Cheetahs” using Cheetah Learning’s innovative Project Management and accelerated learning techniques.

Michelle also developed the [Cheetah Certified Project Manager \(CCPM\)](#) program based on Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality profiling to help students master how to use their unique strengths for learning, doing projects, and negotiating. CCPM graduates are able to choose the right projects and complete those projects “cheetah fast” based on their personality. They also learn how to leverage others’ strengths which significantly improves overall project team performance. When an employer has a cadre of CCPMs on staff, they achieve whatever they set out to achieve in record time. This is why over 90% of Cheetah’s clients experience an increase in both profitability and revenue within the first year of retaining Cheetah Learning for their Project Management training needs.

Honored by the Project Management Institute (PMI®), Cheetah Learning was named Professional Development Provider of the Year at the 2008 PMI® Global Congress. A dynamic keynote speaker and industry thought leader, Michelle is recognized by PMI as one of the 25 Most Influential Women in Project Management in the world.