What gets measured gets improved

A wise man showed the image below to me and a few others. He told us the following. To be successful in any pursuit one needs to work hard and keep improving a tiny bit every day. What matters the most is not the magnitude of daily progress. But tiny progress over long periods of time **without any regressions**.

Why is avoiding regressions very important? I reflected on this question for sometime. Imagine one person who improves his skill everyday by 5 percent. Another person who improves by 10 percent and regresses by 3 percent for the next couple of days. After 50 days the consistent person is up by 5.7 times.
Consistency is the best friend of compounding. Why am I talking about consistency and compounding? Couple of years back I attended Vipassana Meditation and spent 10 days to learn meditation. After coming back I was not consistent with my practice. I was like the guy who went up by 10 and down by 3 the next two days.

The rational part in me understood that regression is a foe of compounding. My limbic system vetoed the rational part by telling that it’s ok to regress in one aspect of my life. But my rational part didn’t agree. Being inconsistent in one area could easily spill over to other areas of life. It is a war between my rational and limbic system.

After a long battle the rational part of my brain won. I am a big believer in what gets measured gets improved. Along with meditation I decided to keep track of my workout and eating schedule. I came up with goals for each category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Oct</th>
<th>Nov</th>
<th>Dec</th>
<th>Reflections</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meditation (in minutes)</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>I start and end the day with meditation. This creates a habit which is hard to break.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active for</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Intensity Workout</td>
<td>2 times per week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat fruits</td>
<td>1 bowl per day</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eat vegetables</td>
<td>2 bowls per day</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of coffees</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I kept track of my progress every day. Table below shows the format used for tracking. I ate two bowls of vegetables on 1st Dec. So it got a score of 1. I only ate one bowl of vegetables on 2nd and 3rd Dec. So it got a score of 0.5. Tracking for other items are self explanatory.
Active for (in minutes) | 30  | 68% | 70% | 53%
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
I try to walk outside at different times. There is no habit formation and it easy to skip it on some days. I need to have a routine and stick to it.

High Intensity Workout | 100% | 50% | 67% | 67%
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
As planned Nov and Dec was much better than Oct. Didn't go during thanksgiving week and had to travel in Dec. This was a conscious decision.

Ate Fruits | 100% | 96% | 85% | 94%
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
I eat fruits in the morning and it's easy to not skip. Thanks to wife for making me a fruit salad everyday.

Ate Vegetables | 100% | 78% | 70% | 73%
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
I eat vegetables in noon and night. Some days we eat outside and this results in skipping vegetables. If I help my wife for preparing dinner the number of misses will go down.

Number of coffees | 2  | 3  | 3  | 4
--- | --- | --- | --- | ---
I need to come up with a strategy for reducing my coffee consumption. Drinking protein shake in the morning should limit my coffee consumption.

I hit my goals on meditation in all 3 months. I was super consistent with low-to-no standard deviation. But there is a lot of room for improvement on being active or when it comes to my coffee consumption. Why is that?

After three months of experimentation and reflections I learnt a few important lessons on my own psychology. Recently I read the book *Think Small* which gave three golden rules for achieving our goals. I can't agree more to these rules as they are completely inline with my experiments and reflections.

1. **Keep it simple.** You should create simple, clear rules that reduce the mental effort required to stick to your goal and let you know when you are transgressing from your objective.

2. **Create an actionable plan.** You’ll find that being able to state how, when and where you’re going to take the actions needed to achieve each of these steps will make it more likely that you’ll follow through.

3. **Turn the plan into habits.** By repeating the same actions in response to the same cues, you’ll be able to create habits that make it much easier to achieve your goal.

**Pavlovian Association:** The dog salivated when it heard the sound of the bell. I meditate twice a day at the same place and time. I meditate after I get up in the morning and before going to...
bed. Getting up and going back to bed is my bell sound. This association is super powerful when it comes to strong habit formation.

**Operant Conditioning:** It is a learning process through which the strength of a behavior is modified by reward or punishment. I feel good when I enter 20 minutes in my tracking sheet after completing my meditation routine daily. The act of noting down and feeling good about it makes the habit formation stronger.

This is the reason why my meditation schedule has low-to-no standard deviation. I try to walk outside at different times. And there is no association (read it as pavlovian bell) and the habit formation is weak. I need to have a routine and stick to it.

**Availability Bias:** What is available easily changes one’s behavior. There is at least a dozen Starbucks within 3 miles from my residence. At work they brew very good coffee. I am not giving an excuse. I know the root of the problem. I need to come up with a strategy for reducing my coffee consumption. I have some plans. Let me see how it goes.

**No one is perfect:** When it comes to eating fruits, vegetables, and high intensity workout, my average ranges from 67 to 94 percent. It is super hard to achieve 100 percent due to several things that are beyond my control. I am perfectly ok to not hit 100 percent. I am aiming for being in the zone of 80 percent and above without regressing. I am almost there.

Recently I read an excellent article titled **Follow The 10,000-Experiment Rule**. Running experiments on ourselves and adapting based on the results is extremely powerful. What I did for tracking my health can be used for reading books, analyzing businesses, and several others.

I am running some experiments to track my study habits. The results are too early to share. Few months back I wrote a post on how to track and improve our problem solving skills. You can read it [here](https://janav.wordpress.com).

Gradual changes from a trickle of water could carve out great canyons. By tweaking genes little by little over a billion years evolution produced you and me. Changes over long periods of time is extremely powerful. To make it work you need to do the following.

1. Come up with a simple and actionable plan.
2. Track your progress daily.
3. Reflect on what works and what does not. Adapt your actions accordingly.
4. Consistency is the best friend of compounding. Convert your actions into habits.
5. Regression is the foe of compounding. Avoid it under all cost.

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