



# Open the Door

*A guide to using systems to accomplish goals and objectives.*

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*1st Edition*

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# Learning to Open a Door

When I first adopted my dog Roxy, I noticed something interesting. Roxy could not understand how to push open a door. Even if the door was opened slightly, she just did not understand that she could simply push the door with her nose to get it to open further. Instead, she would whine and cry until I came in and pushed the door for her. I could understand a puppy not being able to do this, but Roxy was over a year old when we rescued her!

I spent some time over the first few weeks demonstrating how to do this. I would show her that she could simply nudge the door with her nose and it would open enough for her to get through. Initially, even if she opened the door, the next time she needed to open the door, she hesitated and waited for my help.

I started to take a different approach. I realized I couldn't just show her nor do it for her, I had to teach her. I would do less and less each time until she started to understand how to open doors. Armed with the new habit, she learned how to quickly open the doors, regardless of which way they opened. She understood that even a small crack could mean that she could use a combination of her paw and her nose to get where she wanted to go... to the other side.

This, by itself, isn't very fascinating. But over time I started to realize that dogs are extremely habitual creatures. Most aspects of a dog's life are determined by their patterned response to situations. Using this information I could adjust many of her behaviors and even, over time, her temperament.

Dogs aren't the only creature that uses this systematic approach to life. All animals, including humans, rely on habits to survive. Habits become the basic building blocks of our lives, and determine who we are. Learning to control our habits and how we form habits, we can take control and become who we want to become, just as I was able to adjust the habits and systems of Roxy to adjust her behaviors and even her disposition!

# Habits and Behavior

Our habits and behavior have been developed and ingrained throughout our lives. Most of the time, we don't pay attention to it. We just go forward with our usual routines until we find out we need to change something. Once we realize that we need to make a change we try everything possible to fix the problem without actually addressing the underlying system (habit) behind the problem.

Anyone who has tried to lose weight, get control of their spending, change their eating, play a musical instrument or adjust their habits in any way has probably realized that it can be long and difficult.

The reason that we fail is because we are hard-wired to develop routines and patterns which dictate our response to the world. There is information all around us and we need to process enough to survive and move forward.

This means taking repetitive situations and storing them in our brains differently than new situations. With the areas of our life that repeat, we develop habits so that the majority of our brain can focus on critical thinking.

If we try to play a musical instrument, our brain will initially react one way as we learn what to do technically to make music with the new tool. Over time, to free up important aspects of our brain for other aspects of life, we identify a pattern and go through the pattern instead of thinking about every little move. Then we ignore the technical aspects of where to place our fingers and move on to the artistic elements of the music. Without developing the right habits to play the instrument we could never move on to the artistic elements of the music.

Being able to create habits and patterned behavior has been an evolutionary strength and the reason that we are able to accomplish more complex tasks. The problem is that we typically don't design our habits and patterned behavior. They actually form from our natural tendency to take the path of least resistance. We

take an instant to make a decision and replay that instant over and over again until it becomes a habit.

The great thing about understanding the way we process the patterned actions in our life, is that we can gain control of them. We can explore the underlying system that controls an aspect of our lives and make the necessary system changes to take us towards our goals. We can build or rebuild our habits to be whatever we want!

This is amazing because it provides a way for us to become the person we want to be, instead of focusing on our current limitations and lack of control in life. We can go through our lives and systematically develop them to take us where we want to go.

# This Isn't a Novel Idea

The idea that our thoughts and habits control our lives isn't a new concept. In fact, you can see philosophers, spiritual teachers, and ancient leaders using and discussing these exact principles throughout history.

One quote that demonstrates an understanding of habits comes from Aristotle who lived around 350 years BC. He said "we are what we repeatedly do. Excellence then is not an act but a habit." This simple quote shows that he grasps the power of habit over a single action.

Mahatma Gandhi once said:

"Your beliefs become your thoughts,  
Your thoughts become your words,  
Your words become your actions,  
Your actions become your habits,  
Your habits become your values,  
Your values become your destiny."

Even Vince Lombardi understood the power of habit in determining our success in life:

"Winning is not a sometime thing; it's an all time thing. You don't win once in a while, you don't do things right once in a while, you do them right all the time. Winning is a habit. Unfortunately, so is losing."

Today many books have been written on this exact topic. Stephen R. Covey wrote *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, and says "habit is the intersection of knowledge (what to do), skill (how to do), and desire (want to do)."

Jim Ryun, famous politician and athlete once said “motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going.”

## SYSTEMS ARE MORE THAN HABITS

I hate the term “habit” when trying to change our behavior. There is a negative, self-limiting quality to the word “habit”. Therefore I look at the overall “system” which encompasses the habit and also other aspects that we may overlook with “habits” such as external circumstances, triggers, and our personal make-up.

If you are like me, when someone uses the word “habit”, you automatically think that they are referring to a bad habit that they need to change. Because of this preconceived, negative interpretation it is best to use a term that empowers us in our quest to take control. Therefore, I prefer the term “system” over “habit.”



# How Do I Create a System to Accomplish My Goal?

There are many ways to develop a system to accomplish a goal. Whether you prefer to create a written plan first or you decide to monitor your current systems for areas of opportunity, the choice will depend on you. This is one simple and basic method to creating a system to accomplish a goal that you can use in a variety of situations.

## EXPLORE

First determine the purpose. The purpose represents your goals at a very high level. Ignore the actual numbers for a moment and focus on direction and desires. What direction do you want to go? What is the desire behind wanting to set the goal?

If you want to lose weight or get healthy, don't decide on the pounds lost or the calories consumed. This will come later. This is one of the biggest mistakes that people make. They want to get specific and measurable before they even know what it will take to get there. Instead focus on the actual purpose behind losing weight.

The strategy is to get a good idea of where you want to go and why. You may determine that you want to take on a risky investment to get out of debt, but if you really want to get out of debt there are likely other, less risky, ways to do so. At this stage most people make the mistake of determining the exact dollar amount they need without regard to *how* they are actually going to get it. The "how" part is the most crucial element and determines success or failure, not the specific number.

Always try to get to the root of what you want. Why do you want to lose weight? Why do you want to make more money? What feelings are you striving for (pride, accomplishment, satisfaction, revenge etc.)? What will accomplishing this goal allow you to do which you can't now (move out of your parents house, be able to pay for college for your daughter, etc.)?

Getting to the root is incredibly important. Time after time we set goals that we assume will take us where we want to go but the actual reward for accomplishing the goal is not what we expected. It is better to learn this at this step so that you are not met with disappointment and frustration at the finish line. It also helps to understand just what it will take to accomplish the goal and avoids setting unrealistic goals.

So, what is it that you ultimately want? What direction would you like to move? Why?

## REVIEW

Next you will want to review your current systems to get an idea of why you are moving in your current direction and what can change to move you in a direction that you choose.

Donella H. Meadows says in her book, *Thinking in Systems*,

“If a frog turns right and catches a fly, and then turns left and catches a fly, and then turns around backward and catches a fly, the purpose of the frog has to do not with turning left or right or backward but with catching flies. If a government proclaims its interest is in protection of the environment but allocates little money or effort toward that goal, environmental protection is not, in fact, the government's purpose. Purposes are deduced from behavior, not from rhetoric or stated goals.”

If the direction that you decide is to get healthy and lose weight, you will want to explore your daily routines and behaviors. What do you typically eat for

breakfast, lunch, dinner, snacks etc? If you want to pay off debt, where does your money currently go? This should be very specific and if you can only answer in a general sense, my guess is that writing down every dime that you spend will awaken you to areas that you spend an exorbitant amount of money over time, through small purchases (Coffee, restaurants, smoking, alcohol, etc) which can quickly add up to drain your account.

The review process is very important. Don't just think about what you did today or yesterday. Don't think about that one time last year that you did something. This is to spot patterns and habits. We all, as humans, live our lives according to habits. Some were ingrained into us from an early age and some we picked up along the way.

I can recall when I was younger feeling that I wanted to move to a warmer city near the ocean. I wanted to do this because it seemed that every time I was at one of these locations, I was happier and more carefree. I assumed that the warm environment was the reason. The problem was that I was focused on the manifestations rather than the underlying system. The reality was that every time I was at one of these places I was on vacation, which meant that I didn't have to work. If I did have to work, even if it was in a warm locale, the unhappiness and anxiety would have followed. Instead I realized that I needed to focus on the habits and systems around work to relieve the anxiety and stress around the job. This is why it is so important to focus on purpose and review your habits and systems rather than look for one example and then set a goal.

If you are creating a new habit, such as exercising or shopping at a health food store in addition to your usual grocery store trip, you will want to review your current routines to determine where you have opportunity. For some it may be early in the morning, on your lunch break, right before bed, on Saturdays or any other time that you can devote regularly to this new habit. Squeezing it in whenever you feel like doing it will mean failure.

What daily routines do you have around this area of your life and how does this impact your purpose and goals?

## DEVELOP

The “develop” step is where you will brainstorm ways to systematically change aspects of your routine that can ultimately change the direction that you are going and align your path with your purpose. I prefer to think about this and write out several systematic changes to my daily routine to try and understand what it would take to get where I want to go.

This is also where you will determine if it is possible to get where you want to go. If you realize that your goal is to be a billionaire or the next president, the systems that you would need would be radical. That is why it is important to understand the “why” behind the goals. Why do you want to reach this level? This should give you insight into what direction to travel, rather than the specific goal that you should set.

Jerry Seinfeld, the successful comedian, once gave a younger, up-and-coming comedian some advice. The young comedian asked what he could do to have success. Seinfeld responded by explaining to him the system that he uses. He said the key is to write jokes every day. Seinfeld’s system was to create a calendar and for each day he wrote jokes he would put a big red “X” on the calendar. After a few days in a row he had a newfound motivation to “not break the chain.”

I used a similar system to quit smoking several years ago. I focused on this day only. I would tell myself that I may not quit forever and next week I may be back to my bad habit, but today will not be the day that knocks me back to smoking! Over time this became easier and easier. Whenever I was presented with a cigarette I would simply think to myself that I may falter at some point, but today will not be the day that knocks me back to smoking. I didn’t have to conquer smoking for the rest of my life; I only had to conquer that moment.

There are several important things about these systems. First they are all easy. They aren’t conquering the world. They are simply focusing on today. Second,

they focus on progress not perfection. Seinfeld explained that it isn't important how good the jokes are. Over time you will get better and better by doing it every day. Third, they build up momentum over time and turn a new positive behavior into a habit that becomes automatic. Our willpower is finite which is why our systems and habits play such a large role in determining who we are.

You will want to start slow. Find a few minor changes that you can make.

## IMPLEMENT

Implementation is where the rubber hits the road. This is where the other principles for system develop become crucial. Learning how to pivot is as crucial as being persistent. This is also where the most learning takes place.

The goal here is to create consistent, sustainable action. The best way to incorporate this is to start slow, really slow. Instead of trying to wake up and workout for 4 hours, try to wake up and exercise for 10 minutes every day. The 10 minute minimum will be much easier to stick with. The great thing about this is that after a few weeks, it will become automatic that you get up and exercise. It will slowly become a habit.

Once it is a habit you can add more time to your exercise to accomplish any specific and measurable goals. Make sure to understand that the 10 minutes every day is not to lose 50 lbs in a week. Any weight loss at this point is a bonus and usually incremental. The goal is to start a new positive habit that can become the foundation for improvement.

The problem with most exercise plans is that they all emphasize quick results. Instead of focusing on building a new habit, they claim that they can get you instant success. After their 10 day, 30 day, 90 day etc. challenge, what are you left with? You still have to do the hard part and build habits to sustain what you have accomplished. Yet most people never even finish the short-term challenge because

they didn't spend the time to build the proper habits first. The great thing is that once the habits are in place, accomplishing the goals becomes much easier!

Exercise isn't the only place we see this instant gratification mentality. If you find yourself in debt, first build the right habits that will allow you to properly budget your money. Devoting a month or two to work on spending within your means might not seem very productive, but if you build the right habits, it will become very possible to pay down your debt. Instead, though, most people look for instant money to pay it off now instead of working to pay it off over the next 12-24 months.

The truth is that our society is full of this mentality. Almost every time someone tries to sell a new solution to a common problem, they emphasize the get-it-now mentality. Quitting smoking is a life-long process in my opinion, yet products claim they have the quick answer that will solve that problem for you right away. Getting an education isn't about the quickest path to acquire the degree; it is about the consistent learning to ultimately reach a new level of knowledge and understanding. Learning a musical instrument isn't about the DVD you bought that explains it in 30 minutes, it is about the habits that you put in place to practice. Starting a successful business doesn't happen overnight, yet website after website claim to help you start your business in a day/week/month etc.

The best way to reach a goal is to put the habits and systems in place and then grow, yet we have come to expect instant gratification and overnight success. Even the media misinterprets success. They look at the team that won the Super Bowl or the Gold medal winner and ask "How does it feel to suddenly be a winner?" That is ridiculous. They spent years and years working and we reduce it down to a few seconds during the actual competition and ignore everything that actually went into the accomplishment of the goal!

This step is where we must do what most people refuse to do. This is where success or failure is determined. This is why patience, flexibility, and leniency are so important here. Missing one day and getting off track is meaningless if you can quickly get back to your routine. Forming the habit is the crucial part.

## ADJUST

The adjust phase is a little misleading because this phase starts when you begin your system but will continue throughout your life. This is where you will monitor your system for effectiveness, flaws, areas of opportunity, and external changes.

Making adjustments and pivots isn't discouraged here. It is recommended. Learning and adjusting is the best way to incorporate the best systems. You may realize that simply putting your lighter in a separate room from your cigarettes helps you cut down on how much you smoke during the day. Or you may realize that having your exercise clothes next to your bed is the easiest way to get up and get moving right away before you can talk yourself out of it.

The key to this phase is to focus on the system. Look at things systematically to make adjustments. Don't look at the one time that you got off track. Look at the occurrence and determine if there are things that you could do so that next time a similar situation arises you don't get off track.

# Improvement Suddenly Becomes Possible

The greatest thing about changing your mentality to focus on habits and systems to determine success is that success is now about you and what you want rather than some randomness or luck. Yes randomness and luck still exist but those things are much less important when you are moving towards your goals.

Having your car break down and costing \$500 to fix it is an unlucky tragedy when you maxed out your credit cards and have no emergency fund. But if you have paid off most of your credit card, built up a \$5,000 emergency fund, and are making progress, it becomes a little setback. If you are debt free, have a \$10,000 emergency fund, and have to reduce the amount you invest for a month, suddenly the same “unlucky tragedy” is merely a slight blip of a concern.

Recently my boss made a comment at a meeting about me. He said that for some reason, I always seem happy. Regardless of the situation or the people involved, it is easy for me to remain calm and look at the opportunity. He said that obstacles, distraction, or even setbacks didn’t change my attitude from being positive.

The reason that I don’t get too upset about the little things anymore is because I have put good systems in place. These systems mean that the situation is merely a slight blip of a concern rather than some enormous tragedy. It becomes incredibly easy to be happy! Things still rattle me occasionally but most of the things that people get upset about become small when the right systems are in place.

I have read countless books on motivation and success. Most seem to point to attitude as the sole factor for success in life. I hate reading this! The reason that I hate reading this is because they try to persuade us that we simply need to think



happy thoughts and everything will be handed to us. That is ridiculous. But the one thing that I have learned is that our behavior, in a large part, determines our attitude. Our habits determine our attitude. Our situation determines our attitude. Our social relationships determine our attitude. The only way that I have been able to maintain a positive attitude is by incorporating systems that take me where I want to go in these aspects of my life.

The other thing that people notice about me at work is that I always talk about systems. Whenever I see a systematic problem, I understand the larger ramifications of that system. I don't worry about a one-time mistake but I do worry when a new bad habit or an inefficient system develops. I see these things as long-term game changers.

I use the same approach in my life and can see when bad habits are developing. By understanding this, I won't wait until it is an ingrained habit to make a change. I can identify a future problem before it materializes and take steps to remedy that before it gets too big. That is the power of using systems and habits to take you where you want to go. It certainly isn't perfect, but it is the only way that I have been able to consistently get to where I want to go, despite mistakes, setbacks, bad luck or ignorance. It doesn't completely get rid of those things, but it makes them manageable.

The other benefit to developing systems to take you where you want to go is that you understand what it takes to accomplish your goals. You don't develop unrealistic goals because you understand the work necessary to reach your objective. You aren't misled to believe that the "secret" is to think happy thoughts or that you need to think "bigger." You know that improvement is possible, but that you actually have to do the work necessary to get there. You ignore those that claim they know the shortcut and focus on small, step by step improvements.

## NOW OPEN THE DOOR

This isn't about handing you the things you want in life or telling you to wish and all will be provided. Instead this is about teaching you how to adjust your

habits to become who you want to become, achieve what you want to achieve, and do what you want to do with your life.

It is up to you how you use this information. Just as I didn't want to open every door for Roxy, nobody can do it for you. It is up to you to take the information provided and apply it to your ambitions in life. By taking a systematic approach to your goals you will find that achievement becomes possible. Once you do, I assure you that you will understand how to "open the door"!