



a podcast about how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap

Episode 28: How to Work Easier, Not Less - Following Through

Adam: Hi, I'm Adam Sanford. I'm an academic life coach and professor in Los Angeles.

Dinur: And I'm Dinur Blum. I'm a college professor in Los Angeles. And this is Learning Made Easier, a podcast where we discuss how we learn, how we teach, and how they overlap.

Welcome back to Learning Made Easier. This is Episode 28, about how to work easier, not less.

In Episode 27, Adam and I talked about how to plan toward easier. Well, now that you've planned out how you're going to work easier, you need to move forward with following your plan. And in this episode, that's what Adam and I focus on.

For some people, this is going to be really easy. For others, there's a lot of resistance. So, Adam and I talk about how to get around your internal resistance to your plan as part of this episode.

Adam: So, when Dinur and I were talking about this particular episode, I said, "you know, we're telling them: set a plan and follow through - and that sounds like one of Gretchen Rubin's Four Tendencies."

It's also the Western cultural standard: "set the plan, do the job, set the plan, do the job, set the plan, follow through." The problem is, not everybody works like that. And those of us who don't - and that's the majority of us - really feel guilty. We really feel a lot of shame when we set a plan and then we're like, "why can't I follow through? Why won't I do this? I know it needs to get done. Why am I waiting until the last minute or not doing it at all?"

Well, Gretchen Rubin, who I believe we've mentioned a couple of times on this podcast, she wrote a book called *The Happiness Project*, and then another one called *Better Than Before*, but her biggest accomplishment, I think, at least for those of us who are dealing with things like how to manage our lives, is the *Four Tendencies*.

Adam: Now, when Rubin first wrote her book on *The Happiness Project*, she wrote, you know: "here's how to be happy. Here are things you do. Do this, this, this. Then it'll make you happier!"

And that was great. But then she started getting a lot of emails from people saying, "Okay, you say 'do this.' How do I do that?"

And she was stuck. She was stumped, because for her, it was a no-brainer: You do it. She had very much, you know, the Nike slogan, "just do it." Just set the goal and then you do it. Uh, I've heard similar views from Brooke Castillo who says, "once you set the plan, you have to follow through. I mean, you have no choice about it!" Well, no, you do. That's the problem.

And Rubin was kind of stunned by the fact that she had so many people saying, "how do I follow through?" Because for her it was just, "you follow through, but... but... I don't get what the problem is."

And then she stumbled upon the idea of tendencies, and we're going to talk about this for a minute.

When she was talking with a friend of hers from, I believe it was high school, and they were out, you know, they had lunch and her friend was saying, "I wish I could get more exercise. I used to love to run when I was on track, but I just can't seem to get myself to do it anymore. I, you know, I've, I used to be there for the team every day. I used to show up for every meeting and you know, every meet, and I was always there. I was there for every practice. And I love running. But nowadays, just, stuff gets in the way. There are always other people who need me to do something that gets in the way of going and taking a run."

And Gretchen had been pondering all of those emails that she'd gotten from people saying, "how do I do this? How do I make myself do this?" And she asked her friend, "what about finding people to run with?"

And her friend said, "Oh yeah, then I could probably do it."

And from this, Gretchen Rubin figured out that there are actually four ways that people respond to expectations, which is another way of saying a plan, or a chore, or a task, or a job. And there are two kinds of expectations. They're the ones that we have for ourselves, which are internal. Like: I'm going to go on a diet, or I'm going to study everyday for two hours a day without fail, or, I'm going to improve my relationship with my partner by sending them flowers everyday. You know, whatever it is, but it's an internal expectation. We set it on ourselves.

And then there are the expectations everyone else has for us. Our teachers have them, our bosses have them, our parents have them, our partners have them, our kids have them, our friends have them, the world has them: "You will do this thing."

And an outer expectation could be the speed limit on your street, or it could be the fact that your mom is having a Sunday dinner and wants you to show up for it, or your partner's birthday is coming up, or whatever, or a homework assignment, but it is something you didn't choose. It's something that was set on you.

Now, Gretchen, as it turns out, is the kind of person who responds well to both internal and external expectations. Her motto is very much "just do it." I have a thing I have to do. I do it. She's what she calls an Upholder - people who are good at both internal and external expectations, they respond well to both. They follow through. They don't have a problem.

But what she found out, to her shock, is that she's in the minority. There aren't many people who are Upholders.

Now on the opposite side of the coin are the people who don't respond well to either kind of expectation. And she labeled these folks the Rebels. And they're about as rare as Upholders. There aren't a lot of Rebels; there aren't a lot of Upholders.

Rebels? You ask them to do something, and now it's a chore and they're not going to do it. Rebels ask themselves to do something, and now it's a chore and they're not going to do it. Mainly Rebels resist being told what to do, but they even resist being told by themselves what to do.

Then we have folks who react well to one kind of expectation but not the other. Questioners - and Dinur and I have both identified ourselves as Questioners - are really good with the goals we set for ourselves. We follow through easily. It's not hard to do the things that we've decided we're going to do, but if someone else wants us to do something? Better have a really good reason for us to do it! And we will keep asking until we get the reason. Or if we don't get the reason, we'll say, "I'm not going to do it. There's no point in me doing it that way."

For example, a Questioner may say, "well, you want me to get this project done by Friday? Why now?"

Their boss will say, "because I want you to get it done by Friday."

That's not a reason. "Why should I care about getting it done by Friday?"

"Well, I'll fire you if you don't."

Okay, that's a good enough reason, but I'm going to resent you for it. All right? That's not a really good reason. That's just an acceptable reason behind doing it, so I keep my job.

But if the reason that you need it done by Friday is because the customer needs that information on Saturday because they're going out of town for a week? Hey, okay, that's a valid reason. Fine.

Rubin says that what Questioners do is, they turn external expectations into internal ones by questioning them until they're satisfied. There's a good reason to do it.

Finally, we have the biggest group, the Obligers. Obligers respond really well to what other people want them to do, but when it comes to following through on their own goals, they're lost. And this was Gretchen's friend, who could run as long as she was with a track team. But the moment she stopped being on a team, the moment nobody was depending on her to be there, it became meaningless. It became, "why should I bother? It's just me. I'm not important."

The team needs me. That's a good enough reason to show up to run. But if it's just me by myself, why should I care?

Now, one of the things that Rubin says, and you can go to her website - and we'll put it in the show notes - to take a quiz on which Tendency you are. But it's really easy to identify these folks with just a few simple questions. If I ask, what's your opinion of New Year's resolutions?

Now. I know that all of you by this point have thought about what your opinion is, right? All right. If you said, "I have to do that, of course I have to do that!" you're an Upholder, because you set it for yourself and you're following through.

"If you say, well, that's kind of arbitrary, isn't it? Why should I have to set them on New Year's Day?" you're a Questioner.

If you say "New Year's resolutions, what are those?" then you're a Rebel.

And if you say, "if someone else sets them for me, I'll do them," then you're an Obliger.

Or, "if I set a resolution that my group wants to follow through on, like, say, Weight Watchers." Okay, if you're in Weight Watchers and you set a weight goal, you're up, you're obligated, you're accountable to the other people in the group, then you're an Obliger.

Now, the reason that we're telling you about this - and I know that I'm talking a lot, but I'm the one who knows more about Gretchen Rubin; I was telling Dinur about her right before we started recording - there are strategies to get around your basic tendencies when you're resisting doing something.

Now the strategies for each Tendency go like this. If you're an Upholder, you've got this, just do it. Just follow through.

But the Upholder really needs to be careful about getting overloaded, where they do things because other people want them to do them and they do so much that they get exhausted. So Gretchen Rubin says her husband is a Questioner, and she says keep a Questioner handy, to determine whether you have to do this or you just feel obligated to do it, because they're not the same thing. So, her husband will go to her conferences with her, and she'll look at the conference list and say, "We have to go to all these panels. We have to go to this and this and this and this and this and this and this!"

And he'll say, "Why?"

And she'll say, "Because they're on the list, we have to do them."

And he'll say, "Honey, are you interested in, you know, in deep steam fabrication of plastics?"

"Well, no, but this person showed up, so I have to be there!"

"Honey, you don't care about this topic, you don't need to go to it."

"Oh...."

So, a lot of Upholders have trouble determining what's actually important and what's pretty much, you know, optional - where you don't have to do it.

Now, Rebels, on the other hand, need information, consequences and choice. So for a Rebel, they might look at the exam coming up and say, "all right, this exam will allow me to earn 30% of my grade towards this course, and if I don't take the exam and pass it, then I'm probably going to fail the course. So I have a choice between taking it, working toward it, taking it and passing it and passing the course, or not passing the course."

But you've got to have that choice. For Rebels, choice is the most important thing. Now Rubin suggests a few ways to frame it for yourself so that it's easier to make the choices that you need to do.

One way is to say "identity." "I am the kind of person who gets A's. Therefore I do the things that that kind of person does." Or, "I am the kind of person who follows through on what he says he's going to do, because I'm reliable. So I'm going to do this thing that I said I would do because I am a reliable person."

Not “I want to be,” not “I should be,” but “I am.” I am the kind of person who does this thing. It helps a lot for Rebels when they can do that.

Another way to do it, let's say that you are a Rebel, and let's say that you are a night owl, and you really don't like having to take tests at eight o'clock in the morning. You know, and you, you feel a deep rebellion about having to do that.

What you can do is say, “I'm not going to let my tendency to be a night owl control my ability to succeed. I am not going to let this outside thing control what I am going to get done.”

Rubin uses an example where she had a woman write to her and say, “my husband's a Rebel. He's been a smoker for 20 years. He wants to quit, but every time he tries, he rebels. He refuses to quit, because that would mean that he's not being allowed to have the choice he wants to have, which is to continue to smoke.”

And Rubin suggested a couple of different approaches. One is, you could say to him, “Do you want to be the slave of the cigarette companies? Do you want to be controlled by the cigarette companies and their advertising? Do you want to be controlled by the cigarettes?”

Or you could just challenge him, and this is one way that really works well with Rebels - teachers, I'm talking to you - is tell them “I don't think you can do it. So don't bother to try.”

When you tell a Rebel, “Oh, well, you know, I don't think you can actually do this,” they're going to say, “Oh, just watch me!”

If you give them the challenge, they will do it. Rebels, you could set that up for yourself. “Well, I don't think I can do this. Who says? Who says I can't do this? I'll show you.”

All right, so for the Questioner, you've just got to find good reasons for doing the thing. But also, Questioners tend to get analysis paralysis. So if we are picking say wallpaper, we will look at 85 different samples of wallpaper. Limit yourself. Say, “I'm going to look at 10 samples and pick from that.”

Or if you have a choice of 25 different topics for the research paper, put all of them in a basket, pick five out, and those are the ones you get to choose from. Limit how many choices you have to make, because that limits the number of questions you need answered in order to turn that into an internal task, and that makes it easier.

And for Obligers, this is, this is one of the things about Obligers - when people find out that they're Obligers, they often say, “I don't want to be, I want to be able to follow through on my own without help!”

Yeah, that's nice. But that's not how your brain works. That's not how your Tendency works. If you are an Obliger, get outside accountability, find a study group, find a study partner, tell your mom “if I don't get blah amount of studying done than deny me dessert.” You know, whatever it comes down to, find outside accountability.

One really creative way that Rubin talked about someone finding outside accountability is, she had one woman who didn't have anybody close to be an accountability partner. So she made her future self her accountability partner. And she set up her Facebook - and you can do this, set up a post that will post later - so she set up a post every evening on Facebook that said something really, really personally revealing and embarrassing, and set it to post at 6:30 in the morning. She was trying to make sure that she got up by six to go to her, um, to her

aerobics class at seven, and she had to be up by six. So she set this up so that if she had not turned it off by, say, 6:10 - it was going to post. That was a really good motivator to get out of bed and turn off that post every day, to make sure it did not post, because it was really embarrassing and really revealing and that's not something you want to give all your Facebook friends, you know - that you don't want them to know that. And that motivated her to get out of bed, and go over to Facebook, and shut that off, and be up by six, so that she could get to her exercise class by seven.

So this is how you identify your Tendency, because a lot of people will say, "Well, I've set all the plans and then my planner's gathering dust." Here's how to keep it from gathering dust.

So Upholders, just follow through, and have somebody to give you a reality check on whether it's actually necessary, or it's just something someone put on you.

Rebels, get information and consequences, and then make your choice. Frame it as "this is the person I am, this is the kind of person I am, therefore I am doing this thing." Or even frame it as "if I don't do this thing, if I don't follow through, then I'm letting this other thing, or this other person, or whatever control me. I'm letting my habits control me. I'm letting my addiction control me. I'm letting my needs control me." Rebels will respond to that like crazy and say, "Uh-uh! Not doing it."

Questioners, find good reasons for doing the thing and limit the number of options that you look at.

And Obligers, find accountability partners. There's just no way around it. If you're an Obliger, you need someone outside you, so that you can be accountable.

Dinur: You also want to work ahead and work from ahead.

See if you work from behind, you're stressed, you're rushing things. You might be doing things hastily. If you're working from ahead.

The idea is that you're going to be a lot more in control of your schedule, a lot more in control of your time, a lot more in control of your effort. And one way to do that is, you want to try and work ahead of schedule early in your semester. If you can do future assignments well now, and the keyword is do them well, then that - then doing the assignment now saves you time on that assignment later in the term when, maybe, a different class has an assignment that's surprisingly tricky or time consuming comes up.

And one thing that came to mind was, I was taking a theory course my first semester of grad school, and we had to answer a bunch of questions from each reading. But the questions weren't generally especially difficult, as long as you followed the reading fairly closely.

And one of the things I would do was, I would try and finish not only one assignment for a week, but I would try to finish the next week's assignments, so that in case something came up, I had a little bit of a buffer. And if nothing had come up, and I was still consistently ahead of schedule and I wanted to take a break from writing answers for a week, I could afford to do that, because I had done work earlier at a pretty decent quality or good enough for that class, so that I knew that I was pretty confident - or I felt confident, I should say - in what I'd done and that helped me save stress in that class.

And that helped free up time to focus on my methods class that term, which took up more time than I realized. For students: if you know you have time in a given week to work on a project that's not due for four weeks or

six weeks, use that time on that project, because the time you spend on that project now is time that you don't have to worry about spending later. You've put that effort into the project, you've put that energy, you're creating something, you're working towards your goal, and again, the idea of working from ahead is that you're going to be less and less stressed as the semester rolls along.

Less stress does not mean stress-free, but it should mean that the workload is a little bit more manageable, leading to hopefully fewer all-nighters, fewer cups of coffee, fewer Yerba Mates, fewer Monster Energies consumed.

The analogy I like to give is to a baseball pitcher who throws strikes, because the pitcher's always in control of the game. The ball starts in their glove. So if a pitcher throws strikes, which are hittable pitches, early, to a batter, then the pitcher feels confident. They execute their pitches better, because the pitches are moving where and how they want to. They're hitting their targets.

But if a pitcher starts out there throwing the ball all over the place, then they put themselves into higher stress situations. These batters reach base, they score runs. the pitcher's removed from the game earlier, and it's harder to win. So doing early work, successfully, sets you up well for succeeding in your semester.

Adam: Now how do we do it? Well, one bite at a time. Remember we said break up the big project into small bites. The first few times that you go through a planned sequence of tasks, you know, you said "on Monday I'm going to do a two hour block of study, and I'm going to spend an hour on history and an hour on math." All right, use a timer while you're studying, to figure out how long it actually takes you to complete one history homework, or one set of calculus problems.

Remember how we talked about reading? You know, how long is it going to take you to do your reading for this class or that class? All in the same way. Timing yourself the first few times, to see "how long does it actually take me to get through this history worksheet?" or "how long does it actually take me to do the set of calculus problems?" That's going to help you estimate how long things actually take you, and then you can adjust your schedule based on those estimates.

So when you sit down to do work time yourself.

The second thing that Dinur and I want to give you, about taking it one bite at a time, is set it up first and then walk away for a minute. When you sit down to do your work, start by setting up what you're going to do, and after it's all set up - you've got your planner open, you've got your computer open, you've got the document you need to work on on the screen, you've got your calculator sitting next to your math book, whatever it is - set everything up that you need, and go take a five minute or 10 minute break.

So come home, get into your dorm room, set everything up on your desk, and then go hit the bathroom. Get yourself a drink of water, maybe get a snack. Then come back. When you come back to the work after the break, you won't have to fiddle with setting anything up. It's ready to go, and that makes it a lot easier to get started.

And then, we've talked about the 10 minute rule before too. If you find yourself resisting, challenge yourself to do the work for just 10 minutes. Once you get beyond 10 minutes, if you're still resisting, then pick a different task and work on that. Maybe your head's just not set up for math right now. Maybe you need to do history instead, because that's where your brain is. Of course if you're not resisting, keep going. But the idea behind the 10 minute challenge is, just do 10 minutes and see if you get into it.

Dinur: And the way teachers can use this is realize that there are a lot of different approaches to your expectations, and, as teachers, we have to be able to address them.

So, for example, if a student comes up and asks you why they have to do an assignment, a lot of students, if you just say, "well, it's part of your grade," for a lot of students, that's a good enough reason. But for some students, they need a good reason beyond that.

And so, as a teacher you have to be able to explain what you're looking to see from them. What skills do you want to see demonstrated, what knowledge are you looking to see? Because if you can explain what you're looking for - and students tend to meet those expectations because they now know what you're looking for - and the two of you are, to use a cliché, you're on the same page with one another.

You have to be accessible to students asking you questions about assignments, or asking for help planning and following through on assignments, because it's not easy for everyone to just write down due dates and immediately follow through. Even though that's the cultural default for a lot of people, having an accountability partner goes a really long way. So that's where study groups come in. For some people, being told, "here's what I'm looking for. Here's why I want you to do this" - that goes a long way.

Some students might respond to the assignment simply because of the grade. They might want to please you because you've got power in the class and they care about making the boss happy, but there's not a one size fits all tendency. And because of that, there cannot be a one size fits all approach to teaching.

Adam: Remember that Gretchen Rubin suggests that providing information, consequences, and choice about every assignment that'll improve all students ability to follow through, no matter what their Tendency is. Upholders are gonna do the assignment because you said too, but that's how Upholders work. They are our ideal student. I'd say, you know, we want all of our students to be Upholders because then they'll just say, "Dr. Sanford wants us to do this." "Dr Blum wants us to do this." And they just do it.

But Questioners are going to value the information part, because it answers the why. And Obligers will hear the consequences as a form of outside accountability, which they need. Rebels must have the ability to choose in order to fall through. So please try to provide a couple of options whenever possible.

Now, here's how students can use this. First, we talked about the tendencies for a reason. Find your Tendency. Use its strategies to follow the plan you made. Don't try to force yourself into the Upholder box if you're not an Upholder.

If you're a Rebel, all the strategies Upholders use are foreign to you. They make no sense.

If you're a Questioner, you got to have answers to your questions. Don't tell yourself, "I'm just going to force myself to do this." You won't do as well.

If you're an Obliger, stop beating yourself up about the fact that yes, you will need an outside accountability partner or partners. Go find a study group. Go get into a group of people who want to help you. Ask your mom to hold you accountable. Ask your partner to hold you accountable. Make some reward contingent on you doing the thing you need to do.

Gretchen Rubin said that she had one woman who really didn't like exercising, but when her husband started exercising and said, "honey, I need you to come with me because I just don't feel like I'm doing anything

important,” being obligated to her husband's exercise because she knew her husband was not in great physical shape, she was up every morning rousing him out of bed and saying, “let's go, let's go, let's go.” Because she had someone to depend on her. Find someone who depends on you so that you can be accountable.

And if you're a Rebel, you must have choice. But don't make the choice that says, “I'm just not going to do it.” That's allowing the system to control you, isn't it? Find ways to game the system. Find ways to make it so that it does feel like your choice. Remind yourself of who you are, and why you want to do this.

Too many Rebels give up simply because the system is not structured for Rebels at all. The system is structured entirely with, “you must do this thing and you must do it now,” and that presses Rebels’ “you can't make me!” button.

But the thing is, Rebels, you can make you - if you find the right ways to trick your brain into doing it. If you tell yourself, “I'm not going to let the school control how I feel about myself! I'm going to do my damndest on this. I'm going to do my best on this. I am going to ace this thing and show them!” that works. So do the thing that works for you. Find your Tendency and use its strategies to follow the plan you made

Dinur: Develop a “one thing at a time” or “one step at a time” mindset about your work. You don't have to do an entire history project in week one. You don't have to write an entire term paper by week three. You have time. You want to take your projects, your term papers, one step at a time. You know in sports or a lot of analogies that harp on this theme. You know, baseball players will say, “we're taking the game one pitch at a time.” Hockey players, it's “one shift at a time” or “one shot at a time” or in football, “one possession.”

Why? Because they're taking the big goal of getting a win, and they're breaking it down into small pieces, and they're focusing on executing and making those pieces as good as possible. They're trying to make that possession be a good possession. They're trying to make that pitch be a strike. Or if you're a batter, you're trying to get a sense for what the pitcher's throwing and you're trying to get a hit. You're not trying to win the game all at once.

And for students, you also have to be able to set boundaries. You have to be able to say, “I'm sorry; I can't make the game tonight,” or, “I really want to make the movie, but I've got a test coming up,” or, “I've got to work on this project. Maybe we can get together later this week.”

And for some people, that can be tough at first, but you need to prioritize your schoolwork, and if you do, you'll find you have a lot more free time - because each time you sit down to study, you'll be focused, not scattered. So you're using your time a lot more efficiently.

Adam: Now, some folks are, reasonably, going to say, “but it's not about going to the football game,” or, “it's not about going to the movies. It's about the fact that my mom needs me to come home and cook dinner every night, and then take care of my little brothers and sisters,” or, “it's because, you know, my workplace is not allowing me to show up at class on Wednesday night because they scheduled me for an extra shift.”

And if you have these kinds of responsibilities, for example, if you're the oldest child, but you've got a younger sibling who's two years younger than you and they're in high school, maybe it's time for them to take over some of those responsibilities. If you're 19 and you're in college full time, it's your 17 year old younger sister's turn to do the dishes or your younger brother's turn to do the dishes.

And if it's a work situation, really work with your workplace. Say, "look, this is a temporary thing, but I've got to be at school. There's an exam tonight. I have to be there." You do have the right to set boundaries with your employer. If your employer is not willing to be flexible, they're not an employer you can be with while you're trying to go to school.

And if you need help or respite, especially for family issues - for example, if you're caring for an ill parent or an ill sibling or an ill partner - there are social services organizations that can help you with that. Google "respite care" to get started. That's R-E-S-P-I-T-E. There are people who will send someone out for a four-hour shift to help you with your mom who's having chemo, for example.

Dinur: So that's what we have for you in Episode 28! If you're finding this podcast helpful, please share it with your friends. We are always hoping to get new subscribers, so that we can help more people. You can find us on Apple Podcasts, Spotify and Android. We're hosted on blubrry.com. Also, we'd really appreciate it if you wrote a review of this podcast on Apple Podcasts.

Adam: And be sure to join us next week for Episode 29, when we'll talk about kickstarting college if you're a transfer student or a freshman.

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Adam: And we look forward to seeing you next week.