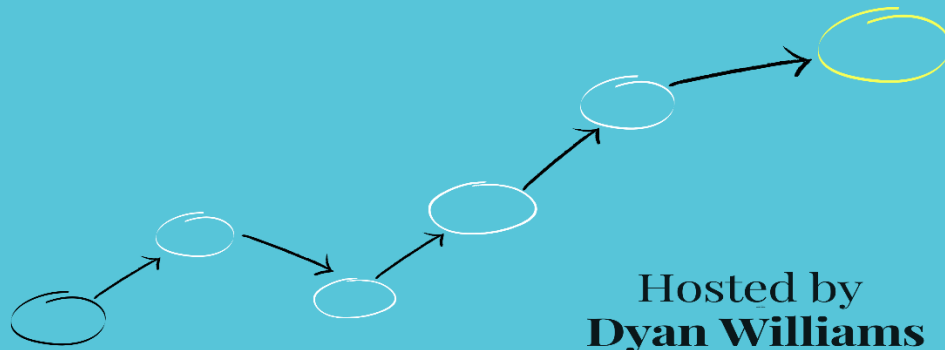


THE INCREMENTALIST

A PRODUCTIVITY PODCAST ON
MAKING BIG CHANGES IN SMALL STEPS



EPISODE 20

Consistency and the Compound Effect

<http://www.dyanwilliams.com/consistency-and-the-compound-effect/>

When it comes to success, do you value intensity more than consistency?

Are you willing to do mundane work to get the desired results?

Or are you jumping from one new shiny thing to another for immediate gratification?

This is Episode 20. Consistency and the Compound Effect.

Hello and welcome to The Incrementalist, a productivity podcast on making big changes in small steps. My name is Dyan Williams and I'm your productivity coach and host for this show.

When I launched The Incrementalist, I committed to making at least 10 episodes before I would allow myself to quit. No matter how I felt – excited or not, I would record and publish a minimum of 10 episodes. I have since doubled that metric.

Intensity of effort matters, especially in the beginning of a project. But it comes in short bursts. It is fueled by excitement and passion. You ride the waves, but you don't control them.

You use intensity as allowed. You go faster, pick up the pace, when you can afford to, when you have high energy and strong willpower. But you can start to get overwhelmed, stressed and deflated as you power through.

While intensity ebbs and flows, consistency is steadier and more sustainable. Even when you feel unmotivated, you can keep taking daily actions to get to where you need to be. You stack up good habits and routines and take small steps to start the project or finish it.

I've had my attorney license for almost 16 years. More than a decade of law practice is a very long time. As much as I appreciate having a solo law firm that allows me to have my desired income and lifestyle, some of the work is mundane, boring actually. Once you figure out a method or system to create desired results for your clients, some of the process is repeatable.

Yes, my practice is more rewarding today than it was before I had the autonomy and authority that I have now. It provides opportunities for clear thinking and creative problem solving.

But sometimes it's not terribly exciting. What allows me to operate at a high level is consistency, not intensity.

There are days when I work very intensely, when I'm in laser focus mode and in a state of deep flow. There are sometimes tight deadlines and due dates to meet. But there's a lot of planning and prioritizing to avoid the need for prolonged intensity. I prefer to have 2-hour blocks daily over the week to focus on a project, instead of grind it out for 8 hours in a day. With the law of diminishing returns, there is a steep decline in productivity after you work beyond a certain number of hours.

I find that breaking things up into small chunks and staying consistent leads to better outcomes. Instead of taking one grand action that requires tremendous willpower, you take small, regular actions that need minimal willpower.

In any domain of life – mental health, physical fitness, business, work, finance, relationships, friendships - consistency is key. You stay consistent while you adjust intensity. You don't just go racing out of your driveway. You modify your speed; sometimes you accelerate and go fast and sometimes you slow down and come to a full stop. You eventually get there if you keep moving.

In my book, *The Incrementalist*, I talk about how we can create big results without venturing too far out of our comfort zone. It takes a lot of motivation, hard work and discipline to change old habits, create new behaviors, and ignite change. Here are the five principles I cover in the book: Prioritize your most important projects, break your projects into small action steps, time block your action steps, synch your natural rhythm, and rest and recharge.

In the introduction I write: "Big successes are created over time and not overnight. 'Big' doesn't mean it has to be noticeable to others, like building a million-dollar business, winning first prize in a major competition, attracting a large social media audience or becoming a best-selling author. Rather, I define 'big' as something that is truly meaningful to you: it deeply aligns with your core purpose and strengths, fosters vitality and presence, adds significant value, makes your day count, and gives you more freedom to design the life you want."

There's a separate chapter on Habits, Routines, Rituals. It reads in part, "Changing a habit involves incremental progress. Celebrate the small gains to keep your momentum going. Intentionally practice your new behavior, perhaps at scheduled times, to allow it to become automatic as fast as possible. The more quickly a new behavior turns into a routine, the less you have to rely on self-control and willpower to drop the old habit and make a new one. And if the routine involves rituals that you look forward to experiencing, the habit is more likely to stick."

Author Darren Hardy notes that small, smart actions, done consistently over time, leads to big improvements. In his book *The Compound Effect*, he discusses how mega success does not arise from quick fix schemes or secret formulas, but through step by step, day by day actions. He's the founding editor and publisher of Success magazine, which reaches about 2 million readers each month. He's had direct access to the most successful business leaders, including Steve Jobs, Elon Musk and Richard Branson. He says mega successful people use the power of compound effect; they make small, consistent changes that have no immediate results or big wins, but create massive, incredible results over time.

I did not know about Hardy's book at the time I finished my own book, *The Incrementalist*, in May 2020. But while I was researching the topic of consistency for this podcast episode, I came across *The Compound Effect*.

Hardy notes that your daily decisions, choices and actions shape the trajectory of your life. They either lead you down a path of desire or a path of disaster.

Long term consistency trumps short term intensity, the legendary Bruce Lee said.

An intense 1-hour workout every week or every month is not as effective as daily exercise or movement for 20 minutes.

Leaders don't become great through one-time training conferences and workshops, or reading a great book, but through regular experimentation and deliberate practice in leading teams.

Great friendships are not made through one-off meetups, but by a series of ongoing, heart-to-heart communication and genuine care for one another.

To avoid cavities, you don't just go to the dentist twice a year. You also have to brush your teeth with intention for 2 minutes total, twice a day, and floss too.

The compound effect is not only about money, like with your savings and investments. It's a mental model and operating system for your life.

The Compound Effect formula is: small smart choices + consistency + time = radical difference

With compounding, you reap huge rewards from a series of small smart choices. Sometimes there are no obvious wins, just subtle shifts. Over time they add up to massive results.

At the start of a new endeavor, you feel fired up, passionate, and you usually set big goals. But then over time, if you're not pacing yourself, you can burn out, fade out, and fizzle out.

And if you don't understand the compound effect, you might give up too quickly before the big payoff. If you chose the right course of action and you're focusing on the vital few things, sustained effort over time is required.

We want short cuts to success. We like immediate results. We're accustomed to instant downloads, fast food, overnight shipping and fad diets. But to benefit from the Compound Effect, we instead focus on aligning our actions with our core values. We look more at the percent gains, not the net gains.

Hardy gives a few examples to illustrate the Compound Effect at work.

The Magic Pennies. You're given two choices– take \$3 Million Now or 1 Penny that doubles every day for 31 days. On the surface, the choice is easy. Take the \$3 million. But with the Compound Effect, there's more to consider.

If you can really double the previous day's investment, you get big rewards over time. The stock market doesn't pay out double every day, but this is a dramatization of what the Compound Effect is.

On day 10, the Magic Penny is worth \$5. On day 20, it's \$5000 – still way less than \$3 million. By day 31, when the magic of compound effect kicks in, you will have \$10 million – 3 times more than \$3 million. The daily doubling in value of the penny compounds to \$10 million in day 31.

The point is, consistency leads to massive results in the long run, with the power of the compound effect. In reality, it takes longer than a month to make a fortune from a penny. But the power of the compound effect holds true for smart investments.

Another example is 3 Friends in the same boat. Friend 1 decides to stay the same – keep the old habits and routines. Friend 2 gets a big screen tv and starts cooking rich, tasty meals to enjoy life more. Friend 3 starts taking walks after dinner and eating a little healthier. By month 1, friend 2 is having more fun but has no real change in his health. Friend 3 is having a hard time with the new routine. By year 1, friend 2 is having fun and has gained just 5 pounds. Friend 3 is enjoying the walks and healthy meals, and has lost 5 pounds. After 3 years, friend 2 is 30 pounds overweight and watching too much tv. Friend 3 has lost 30 pounds, is way healthier and has more energy. He's much more successful too. The significant difference came in year 3, with smart, small daily actions.

You need **daily discipline** to do simple things every day repeatedly and consistently to trigger the compound effect. What is simple to do is also simple to not do.

To create your fairy tale ending, you might have to do mundane, unexciting, and sometimes hard things daily.

You might also have to stop making dumb choices. It's okay to stuff yourself with potato chips and soda every now and again, but doing this every day, year after year, will make you unhealthy and unhappy.

To spark change, you start with awareness. **Tracking your actions is critical to making choices and building habits.** Not only do you have to be consistent, but you also have to take stock of what you're doing and the effects, both intended and unintended.

Step 1 is to track your behaviors, what you do, the progress you make in areas that you wish to improve. Where are you right now? How did you get here?

What's working and what's not? What are your good habits and what are your bad habits? What do you need to start doing? What do you need to stop doing? Is this action moving you closer to where you want to be? Or is it pulling you in a downward spiral?

Step 2 is to visualize or picture where you want to be.

Step 3 is to track your lead metrics going forward. These are your inputs, your actions, and the things you control or influence.

If want to lose weight, one lead metric is what you put in your pantry and fridge. Is there healthy food or junk food?

Are you incorporating movement and exercise daily? Are you sleeping well every night?

The lag metric is the results, like your weight. It's more effective to focus on the inputs instead of obsess over the outcomes.

Step 4 is to track your choices. What are the cues and times of day that trigger certain behaviors? Make it easy to start engaging in good habits. Make them visible and reduce the friction to do them. Do the opposite for bad habits.

If you want to read books when you walk into your living room, put them on your coffee table, front and center. If you want to watch less TV, unplug it or hide the remote control. To hear more on building good habits and breaking bad ones, listen to episodes 2 and 3 of *The Incrementalist* podcast.

Finally, step 5 is to be consistent in your actions. Some say it takes 21 days to form a habit. But habit formation is actually forever. If you stop doing the habit, it's no longer a habit.

Your behaviors get compounded. Your daily habits and actions bring you down or lift you up. Your life comes down to this formula:

YOU and your CHOICE + BEHAVIOR + HABIT + COMPOUNDED = GOALS, i.e., your decisions and actions repeated over time lead to results.

You have the power of momentum, the Big Mo. Your old habits and behaviors are like inertia, the pull of gravity. In the beginning, change is hard and reaps very little reward. But once you take the first step and gain momentum, it's harder to stop. You make faster progress and reap greater results with less effort as you build traction.

In a rocket launch, most of the fuel is consumed in the first few minutes of acceleration. The rocket needs tons of energy to move out of the gravitational pull and into orbit. After that, it takes less fuel to keep going.

Isaac Newton's first law of motion states: An object at rest stays at rest and an object in motion stays in motion with the same speed and in the same direction unless acted upon by an unbalanced force.

Sometimes you do need more tools, resources, information, knowledge and skills. But sometimes it's a matter of finding the variation that fits. Shrink the big action down to small chunks you can manage.

Decide whether this is a high priority or a hobby. Is this thing more important than another? Do you really want to put time, energy and attention into It needs to fit with your time constraints, your personal circumstances, and your season of life.

Let go of perfectionism. Set time limits to finish and ship. Drop the all or nothing approach. Set time blocks to start and make progress.

Stay clear of toxic data, toxic food, toxic associations, toxic environments. Garbage in, garbage out – nonsense input creates nonsense output.

You might get frustrated and quit if you're hung up on getting immediate, big success. Know that the compound effect is always working. If your internal compass and external signs tell you you're on the right path, keep going.

We often overestimate what we can do in a day or week with intensity, and grossly underestimate what we can do in months or years with consistency.

If I want to improve my piano skill level, I need to keep playing piano consistently. I reap better results when I play daily, even it's just for 5 to 30 minutes, instead of just once a week, even if that's for an hour or more. While the weekly piano lessons are tremendously valuable, I still need to practice consistently to sustain and develop skills.

Consistency comes from daily discipline, not willpower. Practice **Book Ending** your day to build daily discipline: These are your evening rituals and morning rituals.

While you might have limited control over your day, you get to decide how to start and end it. Do your most important deep work in the morning. Practice self-care in the evening. Listen to Episodes 14 and 15 for more on morning and evening routines.

Consistency requires you to take 100% responsibility for your choices and actions. Step by step, day by day, your choices will shape your actions, which become habits. Be mindful of the choices you make because your choices make you.

You are responsible for what you do or don't do and how you respond to what is done to you. Whether you're dealing with a natural disaster, an illness, or a financial crisis, you decide how to view and respond to the situation.

In relationships, you may play the role of victim, the villain or the hero. The victim says it's not my fault, the villain looks for someone to blame, and the hero tries to take care of things. But when you take healthy responsibility, you're not limited by these roles; you become empowered and engaged to co-create with the given situation.

The compound effect works both ways. It can move you toward your desired goal or move you away from it.

Consistency is powerful. But you must be willing to change course. Your point of view, perspectives and priorities change. Your goals, objectives, values and interests change. You have skills, knowledge and experience that you might no longer want to use or develop. Sometimes you have to subtract before you add.

Darren Hardy says a key question to ask yourself is this: Is your life today what you wished it were five years ago?

Have you dropped your bad habits? What about your income, lifestyle, personal autonomy, health, relationships, and skills? Are they what you intended them to be by this point? If not, why? Review the choices you made.

What habits, behaviors and actions led you to where you are now?

What areas do you need to change now such that your future self in 5 years will thank you?

If you stay consistent on the right path, the compound effect will work for you. It's not the rare big thing, but the many small things that create extraordinary results.

The Incrementalist ebook is now on sale for \$4.99 up to June 20. After that, the regular minimum price of \$9.99 will apply. Check it out at leanpub.com/incrementalist. The link is in the show notes. Subscribers to my e-newsletter at dyanwilliams.com also get portions of the book for free.

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