

The 5 Secrets to Getting Better at Anything



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Read this first...

One of the enduring traits of successful people is that they're always trying to get better at what they do.

- Leaders want to get better at engaging their team members.
- Parents want to get better at helping their kids grow up to be happy, strong, independent adults.
- Teachers want to get better at inspiring their students to learn.
- Athletes want to get better at the skills of their sport.

That's what this short guide is about: *how to improve the way you do something*—to make the improvement a part of who you are so you never have to unlearn it or relearn it.

There are five fundamentals—basic truths, or “secrets,” if you will—that you should keep in mind the next time you have an opportunity to learn something new. It's all about transforming the new knowledge into permanent behavior patterns that will kick in automatically whenever the situation calls for it.

Once you learn these secrets, you'll know what's going on, and you'll know what you have to do.

Enjoy the book!

Meredith and Denny

Secret #1

KNOWING what to do isn't the same as DOING it.

"Ideas without action are worthless."

— Harvey Mackay, American author

You can learn **what** to do through classroom instruction, coaching, books, videos, and articles. But when the opportunity presents itself, will you actually **do** what you learned?



Knowing isn't the same as doing.

Learning about something is only the beginning. Even if you value what you've learned, acquiring the knowledge doesn't guarantee that you'll actually **apply** it when you need to.

As Morpheus told Neo in the sci-fi movie, *Matrix*, *"There's a difference between knowing the path and walking the path."*

Action is what counts. Because it's what you end up **doing** that produces consequences.

At times, you may act based on your emotions, and the consequences may not be what you hoped for.

On the other hand, sometimes you'll do the opposite. You'll try to be logical about what to do. You'll think it through first. You'll evaluate your options and then go with what you think is best. These decisions will have consequences, too.

But by far, **most of the actions you take on a daily basis are the result of habit—ingrained skills or behavior patterns**—not conscious decisions. You do things without having to think about them—the way you brush your teeth, the way you drive a car, the way you start your day, the way you listen to someone.

If you'd like to get better at the way you **do** things, you need to learn what habits and skills are, and how they form.

Secret #2

Skills and habits have to be hard-wired in the brain.

“You just don’t luck into things. You build them step by step.”

— Barbara Bush, American first lady



Routines, habits, skills, and behavior patterns— from the perspective of your brain, all these words mean the same thing.

Every skill or habit is triggered by a circuit of connected brain cells. Because the connection is physical, it’s permanent. The cells in the circuit are even insulated, like wires.

So it’s not an exaggeration to say that a skill is hard-wired in your brain.

The hard-wiring is why doing a skill is so easy and automatic. You don’t have to concentrate or ponder the action. It just kicks in when triggered by a familiar situation. For example, if you have to think about how you swing a baseball bat, you’ll never get to first base.

Another value of skills—because they’re hard-wired, they stay with you as long as you continue to use them. While you can improve a skill by remodeling the circuit, you’ll never have to relearn it. You never forget how to swim or ride a bike.

How do you establish these brain circuits? It can happen unconsciously or you can make a conscious effort.

This means (1) the way you habitually do things now is already hard-wired in your brain, and (2) to improve or change a skill, habit or routine, you need to *rewire* your brain.

Secret #3

If you repeat a behavior often enough, your brain will wire itself for that behavior, regardless of its effectiveness.

"We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit."

— Aristotle

Your brain doesn't distinguish between effective and ineffective behavior. It will never say, *"Wait a minute, I can't establish a circuit for THAT because it will cause problems."* No, it will simply continue to connect the brain cells for the behavior each time you repeat it.



Brain cells are stimulated to connect by your behavior. The more you repeat the behavior, the more it will continue wiring, until the circuit is fully connected and insulated.

This is true whether you're working on your golf swing or the way you deal with other people.

This is why it's possible to end up with some self-defeating habits or some less-than-effective skills, such as interrupting people when they're talking or procrastinating when faced with a difficult challenge.

During your life you developed "your way" of dealing with people and getting things done. And your way probably includes some ineffective behavior patterns.

That's because when you were young, you probably weren't taught what works best when interacting with others. Instead, you unconsciously picked up ways of relating to people "on the street," so to speak. And some of these patterns may not serve you well when engaging with others.

So to achieve your goals, you may need to adopt some new behavior patterns.

Secret #4

Rewiring your brain for a new skill will take a lot of repetitions.

“We all have dreams. But in order to make dreams come into reality, it takes an awful lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline, and effort.”

— Jesse Owens, American track and field athlete

A well-established pattern of behavior is like a familiar road. You know all the twists and turns, and you maneuver them automatically. But if you discover your pattern is causing you problems, you may decide to find a better way to get what you want.

To establish a new habit, you’ll need to construct a new neural pathway, and this means rewiring your brain—lots of repetitions of the desired behavior pattern.

Classroom learning can be a great start, but it’s only the beginning. Most of the effort of learning to do something has to happen after instruction. Your challenge will be to actually put into practice what you learned from your instructor.

This isn’t so easy, because the old wiring is still there, kicking in just as you’re trying to do something different.

So for quite a while, you have to make a concentrated effort to catch yourself before acting out your old habit, and decide instead to do something more effective.



Like mastering any skill, it will take practice, practice, and more practice before the brain cells involved in the new skill physically interconnect into a circuit that makes doing it feel natural.

So like any athlete who tries to get better, ***you gotta do the reps***, or you’ll eventually go back to your old way of doing things.

Secret #5

Changing a habit is hard to do. But people do it all the time.

*“Habit is habit, and not to be flung out of the window by any man,
but coaxed down-stairs one step at a time.”*

— Mark Twain

One reason habits are so hard to change is that while you’re trying to wire the circuits for a new behavior pattern, the old circuits are still there, triggering your behavior.

This is frustrating. You want to apply what you’ve learned, but you find yourself falling back on old habits. If you’re keeping count, you may realize you’re failing more than you’re succeeding. You may even be tempted to give up. You may think, “This is too hard. This isn’t me. Maybe I should give up and just do what feels comfortable.”

But as you know, people do stop smoking. People start buckling up before they back out of the driveway. People learn to put their cell phones away when talking to another person. Golfers make adjustments to their swing.



Installing a new skill or habit takes time, but you can do it.

The rest of this guide is about how.

What You Need to Do *Implementing the 5 Secrets*

Now that you understand how wiring your brain for a new skill works, you can change the way you approach learning something new.

Actually, getting better at anything is simple. But you'll need to follow through and do the work.



Action #1

Take responsibility for your own learning.

"No one is coming to save me; no one is coming to make life right for me; no one is coming to solve my problems. If I don't do something, nothing is going to get better."

— Nathaniel Branden, American psychologist

People around you may encourage you to change. A coach or instructor may suggest a better way to do something.

But only you can make it happen. No one can make you learn, and once you do, no one can take it away from you. You have to decide whether you have the motivation to improve the skills and do the required work. Because it's your brain. Only *you* can rewire it for a new skill or habit.

And it's going to take more than sitting through classroom instruction, reading a book, or watching some videos.



Are you willing to do what's required?

Do you want it bad enough to do the reps?

Action #2

Focus on improving one skill or habit at a time.

"To do two things at once is to do neither."

— Publilius Syrus, Roman author

If you're ambitious, you may want to correct several behavior patterns all at once. If you're a confident, success-oriented person, you may feel that you're up to such a heroic effort.

That approach would be a mistake. It's hard enough to apply one new skill over and over, enduring the inevitable failures. Trying to work on several skills simultaneously would certainly water down your efforts. You wouldn't get enough reps to improve any of them.



The key is to focus on one area until it starts to feel natural and you're having success. Master one skill or behavior, and then you can focus on improving something else.

If you're serious about rewiring your brain, be realistic.

This means exercising patience and persistence.

Action #3

Don't give up.

*“Grant me the courage not to give up,
even though I think it's hopeless.”*

— Chester W. Nimitz, American admiral

Even if you value what you learned and fully intend to implement it, at first you may forget to do so. You'll have to **make a conscious effort**; and even then, the skill may feel awkward and ineffective.



Almost everyone experiences this frustration at first, because the habits you already have get in the way of the new habits you're trying to adopt. You could become discouraged and conclude it's not going to work out. It's not worth the effort.

The key is to persist past this “crunch point.” ***If you don't give up, if you keep trying***, you'll forget less often. Your efforts will start to achieve results.

Keep trying and eventually your “failure rate” will approach zero. As the brain cells connect and insulate, the new habit will get easier. Eventually it will become dominant, and you'll find yourself performing the new, improved skill without consciously deciding to do it.

You'll become the hero in your own personal development story.

Action #4

Learn from your mistakes.

*“There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation,
hard work, and learning from failure.”*

— Colin L. Powell, American secretary of state

Your early efforts may be discouraging, but you can use these experiences to improve.

Mistakes and shortfalls can be great learning opportunities, if each time you stumble, ask yourself:

- *What happened?*
- *Why did it happen that way?*
- *What were the consequences?*
- *What should I consider doing differently to get better results?*



There are lessons to be learned from any experience, if you take the time to reflect on it.

Action #5

Ask for and accept feedback and coaching.

“None of us has gotten where we are solely by pulling ourselves up from our own bootstraps. We got here because somebody... bent down and helped us.”

— Thurgood Marshall, American Supreme Court Justice

Ask people who care about your development—a course instructor, a coach, a boss, other people who are learning with you, a good friend, or a member of your family—to help you stay focused, encourage you, and hold you accountable.



As you know, even elite athletes who do what they do better than anyone else, are constantly striving to improve their game. And virtually none of them do this without coaching. Feedback, reinforcement and encouragement are worth their weight in gold. So much so that most of these athletes pay for coaching out of their own pockets.

This kind of support can also accelerate your learning. Ask people for input, ideas and feedback. Ask whether they've noticed improvement. Get suggestions about how you can get better.

About the authors...



Meredith Bell is Co-Founder and President of Performance Support Systems, a global software company. Their award-winning assessment and development tools help deliver on-going improvements in performance. Meredith is a relationship-building expert, and many clients have done business with her company for more than 20 years. She's author of *Strong for Performance: Create a Coaching Culture with Learning & Development Programs That Stick* and co-author of the #1 Amazon best-seller, [*Purpose, Passion and Profit*](#). Connect with Meredith on [LinkedIn](#), or contact her at meredith@GrowStrongLeaders.com.



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