



Four Habits That Accelerate Your Performance at Work

How to Thrive at Work, Part 1:

A practical guide to four basic habits for professionals and leaders at every level

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Executive Summary

Most people try to grow at work by working harder or hoping for a good manager. While my previous paper outlined how leader processes have a significant impact on team performance and human motivation, this paper argues that your personal work processes and behaviors, all within your control, also accelerate your work performance and impact on others. While I have found many habits do this, this paper starts by sharing four. They are: making it easy for people to give you feedback, knowing which work ethic archetype you operate in, improving one thing at a time, and managing the mood you spread.

Each habit can be started in minutes and is supported by real data.

Growth at Work Is Left to Chance

Organizations invest heavily in designing how work gets done. Far less attention goes to how individuals learn, align, and influence others while doing it. In my earlier paper, *Why It's Time to Standardize Leader Processes*, I argued that almost no organization designs how its leaders actually lead. The same gap exists at the individual level. Few people are ever taught how to effectively receive feedback, what the most impactful work ethic is, how to best achieve personal improvements, or how their own mood lands within a team. We assume people will pick these things up, and most pick up only fragments.

In working with many organizations over the years, I've seen a very small percentage of people (ranging from the c-suite through front lines) practice these habits, and I've seen the difference it makes for those who do.

The goal is not to add more to your plate. It is to replace a few low-yield habits with a few high-yield ones, small enough to start this week.

This paper covers four habits, each backed by evidence you can check in the Sources section.

The four habits at a glance

1	Habit 1: Be Easy to Coach and Give Feedback To Make it simple and safe for people to tell you the truth about your work, then act on it.	69% of managers feel uncomfortable communicating with employees
2	Habit 2: Embrace This Type of Work Ethic Know which of six work ethic archetypes you default to, and choose the one that holds up over time.	20% global employee engagement in 2025, the lowest level since 2020 (Gallup)
3	Habit 3: Focus on Improving One Thing at a Time Pick a single behavior to work on and practice it until it becomes automatic.	66 days median time for a new behavior to become automatic
4	Habit 4: Your Mood Is Contagious Recognize that your emotional state spreads to the people around you, and manage it on purpose.	12% higher productivity when people are put in a happier state

Habit 1: Be Easy to Coach and Give Feedback To

“Average players want to be left alone. Good players want to be coached. Great players want to be told the truth.” – Doc Rivers, NBA coach and Naismith Hall of Fame Class of 2026 (widely attributed)

In one study of three basketball coaches across five games, coaches gave 2.54 pieces of feedback per possession, roughly 386 per game (Zach & Furman, 2022). This resonated with me when I coached youth basketball. At work, the norm is the opposite. Gallup’s 2024 survey of more than 15,000 U.S. adults found that fewer than half of employees say they have been able to give feedback on their manager and that providing meaningful feedback in the past week was the lowest-rated manager behavior it measured.

Part of the problem is the person giving feedback. In a 2016 Interact/Harris Poll survey of 616 managers, 69% said they are often uncomfortable communicating with employees, and 37% said they are uncomfortable giving direct feedback if they think the employee might respond negatively (Solomon, 2016). Zenger Folkman’s analysis of 7,808 managers found that 37% avoid giving positive feedback and 21% avoid giving negative feedback (Zenger & Folkman, 2017). Part of the problem is the person receiving it: the power dynamic, the need to look perfect, and competitive environments all make candor feel risky. If you aren’t making it easy for others, the feedback stays in other people’s heads or gets shared with everyone but you.

What the evidence says about the payoff

Feedback alone does not guarantee improvement. A meta-analysis of 24 studies of 360-degree feedback found small average gains (a corrected effect size of .15 for direct-report ratings across 7,705 people, where .20 is conventionally considered small), and the authors point to whether people see feedback as useful and see a need to change as predictors of who improves (Smither, London & Reilly, 2005). What you do next matters most. In a study of 11,480 managers in eight companies (more than 86,000 survey responses), Marshall Goldsmith and Howard Morgan found that leaders who discussed their improvement priorities with colleagues and then followed up regularly “showed striking improvement,” while leaders who did not have ongoing dialogue “showed improvement that barely exceeded random chance” (Goldsmith & Morgan, 2004).

Six behaviors that make it easy

1 Initiate the discussion

Ask for feedback right after something observable: a task you did, a piece of writing, a meeting you led. The person may still need time to give you quality feedback.

2 Look forward

Ask, “What is one specific tweak that would make it better next time?” Forward-looking questions are easier to answer and easier to act on.

3 Show gratitude

Express your appreciation for the feedback.

4 Don’t react in the moment

Do not disagree or try to convince them otherwise. Give yourself time to process. If you truly don’t understand, ask no more than one or two clarifying questions.

5 Decide what to do

Not all feedback is equal. Some is worth acting on and some is not. Choose deliberately.

6 Circle back

Tell the person what you did as a result, thank them again, and then ask for more feedback in the future right after you did something observable. It strengthens the relationship by making them a stakeholder in your outcomes, completes the loop, and makes them more likely to offer you feedback or coaching again.

In practice

Atul Gawande, the surgeon and author, wrote in *The New Yorker* (October 3, 2011) that after eight years in practice he recognized his performance had plateaued. He asked Robert Osteen, a retired surgeon and former mentor, to watch him operate. Osteen filled a notepad with small observations: Gawande was holding his elbows too high, the way the patient was draped made it hard for his assistant to pull the wound upward, and the operating light had drifted without anyone noticing. “That one twenty-minute discussion gave me more to consider and work on than I’d had in the past five years,” Gawande wrote. He kept the coaching going, added video review, and later reported that his complication rate had gone down, while cautioning that it was too soon to be sure it wasn’t random.

P, a leader at a health care company in Australia, asked his colleagues after every meeting he led what worked well and what could change to make the next one better. He thanked them, held his reactions, decided which feedback to act on, and circled back. His meetings improved significantly, earning him increased responsibility and the respect of his peers. **J**, a CHRO at a large financial institution, goes old school: every year her team writes feedback for her and drops it off anonymously.

Self-check: *On a scale of 1–5, how well are you making it easy for others to give you feedback, regardless of your role?*

Habit 2: Embrace This Type of Work Ethic

“Hard work spotlights the character of people: some turn up their sleeves, some turn up their noses, and some don’t turn up at all.” – Sam Ewing (widely attributed)

Most people treat work ethic as a single dial: you are either a hard worker or you are not. The evidence suggests it is closer to a range, and both ends of it carry real costs. The people who go the furthest are not the ones who push hardest. They are the ones who find the setting that holds up over time.

On one end, Gallup’s 2026 State of the Global Workplace report found that global employee engagement fell to 20% in 2025, its lowest level since 2020, with another 17% actively disengaged. That leaves roughly six in ten employees in the large middle: showing up, doing enough, not really engaged.

On the other end, economist John Pencavel’s analysis of WWI-era British munitions-factory records found that a six-day, 48-hour week produced slightly more total output than a seven-day, 70-hour week. Past a certain point, extra hours stopped adding output and started subtracting from it (Pencavel, 2014). Separately, a study of 587 managers and executives at a Dutch telecom company separated two kinds of hard work: workaholism (working excessively and feeling compelled to) and engagement (energy and dedication). Only engagement was clearly linked to higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment; working excessively had essentially no link to job satisfaction (Schaufeli, Taris & Van Rhenen, 2008).

The difference was not how many hours people put in. It was whether the effort came from energy and dedication or from compulsion.

The six work ethic archetypes

1	The Minimalist Does only what is required, and disengages when nobody is watching.
2	The Steady Coaster Reliable and rarely fails, but rarely stretches either.
3	The Flexible Performer Adapts intensity to the moment: pushes hard when it matters, recovers when it does not.
4	The Workaholic Always on, and often rewarded early. Running underneath it is the pattern above: extra hours stop adding output (Pencavel), and working excessively adds little satisfaction (Schaufeli).
5	The Performative Workaholic Either 'minimalist' or a 'steady coaster' when nobody is watching but then becomes a 'workaholic' when they believe the leader is watching.
6	The Balanced Achiever Sustains high effort on what matters most, driven by energy and dedication rather than compulsion. Where the Flexible Performer lets the situation set the pace, the Balanced Achiever sets a sustainable pace on purpose. This is the engaged profile that held up best in the data above.

Most people operate in archetypes 1-5. The goal is to notice which archetype you are actually operating in and to choose it intentionally regardless of your broader work environment. Hopefully, more people choose the sixth one as their norm and flex to some of the other archetypes as the exception (e.g., not feeling 100%) and not the rule.

In practice

B was a management consultant who was a hard driving workaholic. Working while sick or injured, deferring seeing loved ones in the ER to finishing meetings, often working after dinner Monday through Thursday. **B** realized this was adversely impacting his life, his relationships, and his productivity. He realized too much of that work was less impactful and became a balanced achiever by deprioritizing the low impact activities impacting his time. He started by protecting Monday and Thursday evenings (barring a true emergency) to spend time with loved ones and enjoy his hobbies. This helped him feel more energized and intentional during the work week and more connected with his loved ones, rather than cramming that time into weekends.

Self-check: Which work ethic archetype are you operating in this week, and which one do you want to operate in?

Habit 3: Focus on Improving One Thing at a Time

"I fear not the man who has practiced 10,000 kicks once, but I fear the man who has practiced one kick 10,000 times." – Bruce Lee (authenticated by the Bruce Lee Foundation from the Bruce Lee Family Archive; original context unpublished)

In a fast-paced world we feel pressure to improve everything at once. The fear of missing out, the pressure to be well-rounded, impatience, and the belief that more goals mean more progress all push us to spread ourselves thin. The result is often minimal progress in many areas instead of mastery in one. Three lines of research point toward focused rather than diffuse goals:

Habits take time. In a University College London study, 96 volunteers each chose one new healthy behavior and tracked it daily for 12 weeks. Among the 39 whose data fit the model, it took a median of 66 days to reach a plateau of automaticity, with a range of 18 to 254 days (Lally et al., 2010). The study tracked one behavior at a time, so it cannot compare one goal against several. But it does show that real change takes weeks to months of consistent repetition, which is a strong argument for focused repetition of one goal, behavior or habit, rather than a scattershot approach across multiple objectives.

Divided attention has costs. Researcher Sophie Leroy showed that people who switch tasks before finishing keep thinking about the unfinished one and perform worse on the next, a phenomenon she calls "attention residue" (Leroy, 2009). In a study by Gloria Mark and colleagues, interrupted workers finished a task in about 20.3 to 20.6 minutes versus 22.8 minutes for uninterrupted workers, but reported significantly more stress, frustration, time pressure, and effort (Mark, Gudith & Klocke, 2008).

Expertise comes from focused practice. Anders Ericsson and his colleagues found that top performers built their skill through sustained, effortful practice on specific aspects of performance, with feedback from a coach (Ericsson, Krampe & Tesch-Römer, 1993).

Six ways to do it

1	Choose wisely Pick the one skill that will have the highest impact on your work, weighing immediate and long-term benefits.
2	Set a timeframe Commit to a fixed period, typically 30 to 90 days, to create urgency and prevent dabbling.
3	Break it down Divide the skill into small components that you can practice daily.
4	Track progress Use a specific measure, whether journaling, data, or regular assessments. Franklin used marks in a notebook.
5	Resist adding more Put new opportunities on a "future focus list" instead of diluting your current effort.
6	Share it openly Share your single focus with a mentor or colleagues who can help you stay with it.

In practice

The best-documented example is one of the oldest. **Benjamin Franklin** describes it in his *Autobiography*. He drew up a list of thirteen virtues he wanted to build, beginning with temperance, and decided not to work on them all at once: “I determined to give a week’s strict attention to each of the virtues successively.” He kept a little book with a page for each virtue, marked a spot every time he slipped, and set out to keep the current week’s virtue clean. Thirteen weeks made a course, and he could complete “four courses in a year,” but at any given moment he was working on exactly one. He likened his method to a gardener who “does not attempt to eradicate all the bad herbs at once ... but works on one of the beds at a time.”

In my work with clients, I see the same pattern: leaders who are crystal clear on the one thing they are improving as a leader see better results than leaders who are not explicit. N, the CEO of a scaling tech company, focuses on one leadership skill every six months and then does a diagnostic to ensure he has pulled through the improvement and determine what skill to focus on next over the coming six months.

Self-check: *On a scale of 1–5, how well are you focusing on one improvement at a time?*

Habit 4: Your Mood Is Contagious

*“The leader’s mood and behaviors drive the moods and behaviors of everyone else.” – Daniel Goleman, Richard Boyatzis, and Annie McKee, *Harvard Business Review*, December 2001*

Think about the last time you walked into a room where someone was visibly stressed or anxious. How quickly did you start to feel the same way? Our moods are not just personal experiences. They shape how our teams and colleagues perform.

What the evidence says

Moods spread. In a laboratory study, Sigal Barsade had a trained actor join 29 small groups (94 business students in total) working on a management exercise, displaying either pleasant or unpleasant moods. Group members caught the mood. How much positive mood a group caught explained about 19% of the differences in cooperation between groups and 18% to 23% of the differences in conflict (Barsade, 2002). Notice that the person spreading the mood wasn’t the leader. They were just another member of the group. In real workplaces, a study of 70 work groups (357 people) found that members’ moods converged and that outside observers could read a group’s mood from facial, vocal, and postural cues (Bartel & Saavedra, 2000). Goleman and colleagues, drawing on research across 70 work teams, note that people meeting together tend to share moods, good and bad, within about two hours.

Mood affects output. In three randomized experiments (276, 104, and 148 people), those put in a happier state by a comedy clip or snacks were about 12% more productive on a timed arithmetic task. In a fourth study of 179 people, those who had recently suffered a family tragedy were about 10% less productive (Oswald, Proto & Sgroi, 2015).

Five ways to manage your emotional impact

1 Know your mood is contagious

Recognize that your emotional state affects everyone around you.

2 Track your mood and acknowledge it

Practice regular check-ins (even if in your own head), for example, “I am stressed.” Decide if and when to share it and with whom.

3	Assess your non-verbal damage Monitor your body language, facial expressions, and behavioral cues.
4	Review your communication impact Consider how your spoken and written messages might land.
5	Make intentional adjustments Identify and implement small changes to improve your emotional presence.

In practice

D, the former CEO of a large global company, learned from a senior HR colleague that his mood was contagious from the moment he got out of his car at headquarters. When I met with him and his HR leaders, they described how he now makes a point of not making decisions when he's feeling anxious, self-pitying, or defensive, and of cultivating a positive mood even in times of stress.

A, a CEO of a successful tech company, had just come out of a difficult meeting. He started our meeting by immediately sharing he was very frustrated coming out of his previous meeting. It allowed him to reset and focus for our meeting. It also allowed others to feel empathy for him. He could have easily taken a different path and let those emotions boil below the surface during our meeting which would have made it less productive.

Managing your emotional presence is not about suppressing authentic feelings. It is about being mindful of your impact on others and taking responsibility for the emotional climate you create.

Self-check: *On a scale of 1–5, how well are you managing your mood at work?*

Where to Start

These habits are not meant to be adopted all at once. Habit 3 argues against it. Pick the one that fits where you are most constrained, run it for 30 to 90 days, and then add the next.

If you notice...	Start with...
You rarely hear candid input, or the feedback you get is vague	Habit 1: Be easy to coach
You default to either coasting or overworking, and are not sure which	Habit 2: Embrace this work ethic
You are trying to improve everything and progress feels thin	Habit 3: One thing at a time
Your team seems tense, drained, or reactive around you	Habit 4: Manage the mood you spread

If you lead a team, Habits 1 and 3 are the individual counterpart to two of the leader processes described in my earlier paper: the same emphasis on feedback and deliberate skill-building, applied to yourself rather than your team.

A question for you: Which one of these four habits would make the biggest difference for you this quarter, and who will you tell so they can help you stay with it?

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