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The Habits Scorecard: Use This Simple Exercise to Discover Which Habits You Should Change

This article is an excerpt from Atomic Habits (<https://jamesclear.com/atomic-habits>), my New York Times bestselling book.

The Japanese railway system is regarded as one of the best in the world. If you ever find yourself riding a train in Tokyo, you'll notice that the conductors have a peculiar habit.

As each operator runs the train, they proceed through a ritual of pointing at different objects and calling out commands. When the train approaches a signal, the operator will point at it and say, "Signal is green." As the train pulls into and out of each station, the operator will point at the speedometer and call out the exact speed. When it's time to leave, the operator will point at the timetable and state the time. Out on the platform, other employees are performing similar

actions. Before each train departs, staff members will point along the edge of the platform and declare, "All clear!" Every detail is identified, pointed at, and named aloud.

This process, known as Pointing-and-Calling, is a safety system designed to reduce mistakes. It seems silly, but it works incredibly well. Pointing-and-Calling reduces errors by up to 85 percent and cuts accidents by 30 percent. The MTA subway system in New York City adopted a modified version that is “point-only,” and “within two years of implementation, incidents of incorrectly berthed subways fell 57 percent.”

Pointing-and-Calling Your Habits

Pointing-and-Calling is so effective because it raises the level of awareness from a nonconscious habit to a more conscious level. Because the train operators must use their eyes, hands, mouth, and ears, they are more likely to notice problems before something goes wrong.

My wife does something similar. Whenever we are preparing to walk out the door for a trip, she verbally calls out the most essential items in her packing list. “I’ve got my keys. I’ve got my wallet. I’ve got my glasses. I’ve got my husband.”

The more automatic a behavior becomes, the less likely we are to consciously think about it. And when we’ve done something a thousand times before, we begin to overlook things. We assume that the next time will be just like the last. We’re so used to doing what we’ve always done that we don’t stop to question whether it’s the right thing to do at all. Many of our failures in performance are largely attributable to a lack of self-awareness.

One of our greatest challenges in changing habits is maintaining awareness of what we are actually doing. This helps explain why the consequences of bad habits can sneak up on us. We need a “point-and-call” system for our personal lives.

That's the origin of the Habits Scorecard, which is a simple exercise you can use to become more aware of your behavior.

The Habits Scorecard

To create your own Habits Scorecard, start by making a list of your daily habits.

Here's a sample of where your list might start:

- Wake up
- Turn off alarm
- Check my phone
- Go to the bathroom
- Weigh myself
- Take a shower
- Brush my teeth
- Floss my teeth
- Put on deodorant
- Hang up towel to dry
- Get dressed
- Make a cup of tea

... and so on.

Once you have a full list, look at each behavior, and ask yourself, "Is this a good habit, a bad habit, or a neutral habit?" If it is a good habit, write "+" next to it. If it

is a bad habit, write “-”. If it is a neutral habit, write “=”.

For example, the list above might look like this:

- Wake up =
- Turn off alarm =
- Check my phone -
- Go to the bathroom =
- Weigh myself +
- Take a shower +
- Brush my teeth +
- Floss my teeth +
- Put on deodorant +
- Hang up towel to dry =
- Get dressed =
- Make a cup of tea +

The marks you give to a particular habit will depend on your situation and your goals. For someone who is trying to lose weight, eating a bagel with peanut butter every morning might be a bad habit. For someone who is trying to bulk up and add muscle, the same behavior might be a good habit. It all depends on what you're working toward.

How Do I Know if a Habit is Good or Bad?

Scoring your habits can be a bit more complex for another reason as well.

The labels “good habit” and “bad habit” are slightly inaccurate. There are no good habits or bad habits. There are only effective habits. That is, effective at solving problems. All habits serve you in some way—even the bad ones—which is why you repeat them.

When completing your Habits Scorecard, however, you can categorize your habits by how they will benefit you in the long run. Generally speaking, good habits will have net positive outcomes. Bad habits have net negative outcomes. Smoking a cigarette may reduce stress right now (that’s how it’s serving you), but it’s not a healthy long-term behavior.

If you’re still having trouble determining how to rate a particular habit, here is a question I like to use: “Does this behavior help me become the type of person I wish to be? Does this habit cast a vote for or against my desired identity?” Habits that reinforce your desired identity are usually good. Habits that conflict with your desired identity are typically bad.

Where to Go From Here

As you create your Habits Scorecard, there is no need to change anything at first. The goal is to simply notice what is actually going on. Observe your thoughts and actions without judgment or internal criticism. Don’t blame yourself for your faults. Don’t praise yourself for your successes.

If you eat a chocolate bar every morning, acknowledge it, almost as if you were watching someone else. *Oh, how interesting that they would do such a thing.* If you binge-eat, simply notice that you are eating more calories than you should. If

you waste time online, notice that you are spending your life in a way that you do not want to.

The process of behavior change always starts with awareness. Strategies like Pointing-and-Calling and the Habits Scorecard are focused on getting you to recognize your habits and acknowledge the cues that trigger them, which makes it easier to discover which habits you should change and respond in a way that benefits you.

This article is an excerpt from Chapter 4 of my New York Times bestselling book Atomic Habits. Read more here (<https://jamesclear.com/atomic-habits>).

FOOTNOTES

1. Alice Gordenker, “JR Gestures (<https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2008/10/21/reference/jr-gestures/#.WvIG49Mvzu1>),” Japan Times.
2. Allan Richarz, “Why Japan’s Rail Workers Can’t Stop Pointing at Things (<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/pointing-and-calling-japan-trains>),” Atlas Obscura.
3. When I visited Japan, I saw this strategy save a woman’s life. Her young son stepped onto the Shinkansen, one of Japan’s famous bullet trains that travel at over two hundred miles per hour, just as the doors were closing. She was left outside on the platform and jammed her arm through the door to grab him. With her arm stuck in the door, the train was about to take off, but right before it pulled away, an employee performed a safety check by Pointing-and-Calling up and down the platform. In less than five seconds, he noticed the woman and managed to stop the train from leaving. The door opened, the woman—now in tears—ran to her son, and a minute later the train departed safely.



Thanks for reading. You helped save a life.

Whenever you buy one of [my books](https://jamesclear.com/books) (<https://jamesclear.com/books>), join the [Habits Academy](https://habitsacademy.com) (<https://habitsacademy.com>), or otherwise contribute to my work, 5 percent of the profits are donated to the Against Malaria Foundation (AMF).

With each donation, AMF distributes nets to protect children, pregnant mothers, and families from mosquitos carrying malaria. It is one of the most cost-effective ways to extend life and fulfills my bigger mission to spread healthy habits and help others realize their full potential.

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