Mini Goals, Maxi Gains

Tom Tan

Introduction: Imagine you drafted a new year resolution of going to the gym every day because you listed all the benefits of working out. One evening, you come back home from work, exhausted. You are conflicted. Should I go to the gym? Or let me just take it easy today, and munch some chips while watching some TV. In no time, you realize it is more and more difficult to get back to the new year resolution. Today, Tom Tan is going to share with us a method called Mini Goals, which should overcome this inertia. With his speech MINI GOALS, MAXI GAINS, help me welcome Toastmaster Tom Tan.

(Attention catcher) By show of hands, how many of you like me sometimes procrastinate at work, will not start a task until its deadline is approaching, or just won't start at all? (PAUSE) How many of you like me have an exciting new year resolution, starting off strong, but give it up after a few weeks, or even a few days?

(Presenting the problem) We all raised the hands. So apparently, today's speech will be of interest to all of us, because many of us encounter resistance against either starting or continuing what we should do. (Need) Such resistance can seriously jeopardize our career advancement, our relationship with the loved ones, and our self-improvement.

(Satisfaction) To overcome this inertia, I will present a method, called Mini Goals. It has helped me form some good habits and reap maximal benefits.

(Part I) Before we begin, let's consider two common methods of overcoming the resistance of actions. The first method uses motivation. It's like taking a steroid shot (body language), pumping us up with self-suggestions, such as "You are the best. You can do this." The second method uses willpower. It's like clenching our teeth to endure the pain of continuing the activity until it is finished (body language). Notwithstanding some short-term successes, both methods are unsustainable. They have diminishing returns, and many of us have limited willpower.

(Part II) The Mini Goals method, however, can overcome inertia and eventually help us form a good habit. It has three key steps. Step one, we need to define a modest enough goal. This goal has to be really easy to reach, and costless to our willpower. The purpose of setting a mini goal is for overcoming the resistance to start. For example, to support my research and writing, I should read more journal articles. My mini goal is just one paragraph a day. No kidding, Tom. Reading a paragraph is simple enough and almost effortless for me. After reading this one paragraph, I feel "not bad today, how about another paragraph?" (voice variety) Then I keep reading until I am tired. In the end, I feel extra proud for exceeding the original plan of reading only one paragraph. (Quieter voice) Reading the first paragraph is usually much more difficult than reading the second one. Even though I may not read many paragraphs in one go, I am more likely to read the journals more frequently, so that I can eventually develop a reading habit.

The second step is to provide a reward. Ideally the result of the activity should naturally bring some rewards. If I work out, I earn the rewards of endorphins and six pack abs. If I write more papers, I enjoy the reward of more publications. If I give more speeches, I gain the reward of better communication skills. However, such rewards take time to become tangible. Instead, we need to create a reward for achieving the mini goal each time. For example, after each work out, a delicious chocolate protein shake is my reward. I give myself this reward only when I exercise, regardless of its intensity. After enjoying this reward, I feel great about challenging myself, and ready for the next time.

The third step is to track the performance. In other words, we need to know when we have acquired the habit. One sign is that we don't need to think about the necessity of doing that activity. Instead, we just know it is time of the day for us to do it. Now I don't need to remind of myself of the benefits of working out, I just do it every day. Another sign is that we start to consider the activity as our identity. If I am used to giving speeches, I will say I am a speaker. If I write frequently, I will declare I am a writer. If I read persistently, I will proudly say I am a reader.

(Conclusion) To summarize, today I presented a method called Mini Goals to help us overcome procrastination and giving up on original plans. I learnt this method from a blog post called "Take the one push-up challenge". It has helped me get in better shape, and get a paper recently published at a top journal in my field.

Why does this method work? It's actually simply physics. Imagine a block resting on the slope of a smooth ramp. If we give this block a little nudge, it will start sliding down the slope. Static friction is bigger than kinetic friction. The mini goal is like a little nudge to get us going, so that the friction we encounter after we begin will be smaller. (Pause) Think about what kind of mini goals you can set <u>at work</u>, <u>at home</u> or just <u>for yourself</u> (Point to three corners). Then give yourself a little nudge. With time, you are going to be a productive employee, a loving spouse or parent, and a better yourself!