



A Guide to Shaping: Overcoming the insurmountable and eating elephants

By Francisco Gomez

Consider what it takes to achieve your long term business goals, get a graduate degree, earn your martial arts black belt, or learn a new language. These are all inspirational goals that promise long-term rewards. But, like most accomplishments worth pursuing, they are distant summits that won't be reached until a lot of effort has been invested. While some people achieve one goal after another, others quit

This is not a laundry list of activities, but rather the few behaviors that will produce the highest impact.

– Francisco Gomez

before they start the climb. What is it about the *achievers* that help them overcome what may seem insurmountable? Are they born with more grit and energy? Or could it be that they use a method we can all learn and apply? I propose that much of it is learned behavior and that a basic understanding of behavioral science will equip you to do the same. Whether or not they are aware of it, *achievers* are employing one of the most powerful tools from behavioral science; they are *shaping* their own behavior by breaking down the desirable goal into achievable steps that they can then tackle systematically. How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time (with all due apologies to elephant lovers and vegetarians). This old saying captures the essence of shaping. Attempting to reach the distant goal without a strategy that identifies the small steps is like trying to eat that elephant in one bite.

Shaping behavior, whether your own or someone else's, can be successful when you apply the following steps:

Be clear and objective about the goal. To quote the Roman philosopher Seneca, *"If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable."* So start with the results. What does the prize look like? Do you want to increase your

fourth quarter revenues by 10%? Do you want an MBA with honors within 2 years? Do you aspire to run a triathlon in under an hour and a half? The objective is to identify the sub-goals or milestones that will lead you to the long-term goal. Write each sub-goal down and track your progress. Aubrey Daniels' blog, [When Setting Goals, Smaller is Better](#), is a great resource for this.

Identify the critical behaviors. Once you're clear on what the long- and short-term results look like, then figure out what the most critical few behaviors are that will help you achieve the results and write those down. This is not a laundry list of activities, but rather the few behaviors that will produce the highest impact. A good source of ideas for those behaviors might be to observe what high performers do in your respective area of interest. Do the research, ask the questions, take the classes, and identify what these best practices are.

Program in reinforcement. My good friend and mentor Aubrey Daniels likes to say, "Behavior goes where reinforcement flows." In other words, we do that which gets reinforced. So, in your shaping strategy, be sure that you set up reinforcement for the critical few behaviors to keep you moving forward. The idea is to ensure that there will be more immediate rewards and reinforcement on your trajectory to the final goal, which might not happen for quite a while (e.g., neurologists are in school for 12 years)! This doesn't necessarily mean you buy yourself chili cheese fries and an ice cream sundae every time you hit a milestone in your fitness goal. Get

"If one does not know to which port one is sailing, no wind is favorable."

—Seneca



creative in the numerous reinforcement sources available. If you have a fitness goal, choose an exercise or sport you actually enjoy doing. If completing a novel is your goal, involve yourself in a creative writing class. This way you will get reinforcement and feedback from peers.

Talk to yourself productively. Believe it or not, self-talk, or how you talk to yourself about your performance, is another critical

Whether or not they are aware of it, *achievers* are employing one of the most powerful tools from behavioral science; they are *shaping* their own behavior.

source of punishment or reinforcement for your progress. If you tend to punish yourself with negative self-talk like “I’m a failure!” or “I’ll never reach my goals.” or “Who am I kidding, this is too difficult for me!” then you are, in effect, sealing that fate. Persistent negative self-talk punishes your progress and demotivates you. If instead you shine a more positive light on your progress, you are reinforcing or strengthening the attempts and therefore keeping yourself moving

in the right direction. It’s much better to ask, “How much better am I now than last week or last month?” and “How much closer am I to my goal?” or, if you make any errors ask, “What did I learn from that mistake?” Those are questions that motivate and propel you forward so employ them as tools on your path to the goal.

Find accountability partners. As previously mentioned, it’s important to come in contact with the right consequences on the path to your goal. A good partner will push you when you need it, give you feedback on how you’re doing, and celebrate your wins.

Track your performance and apply what you’ve learned. An effective shaping program recognizes and reinforces small

improvements in performance that might be hard to see without data. Data trends allow you to objectively and precisely assess movement in any direction allowing you to adjust accordingly, stop doing what isn’t working, and do more of what is working. Electronic fitness trackers are a great example of a modern tool designed to help us track our fitness progress in a very precise way. Rather than making assumptions on how we’re doing, which predisposes us to over- or underestimating our performance, fitness trackers give us exact, data-based information that helps to pave our path to the goal.



Once you’ve built your shaping plan, take action! Don’t expect perfection, but rather progressive improvement. Don’t compare yourself to others but rather compare your present performance to your past. Are you better than you were last week or last month? If so, celebrate it! Take the first step and start shaping—one bite at a time.

• • • • •

[About the Author]

FRANCISCO GOMEZ, PH.D.



As a bilingual senior consultant, Francisco supports clients with large-scale behavior change and has a proven record of generating measurable performance improvements across a diverse set of industries and business needs. In his free time, Francisco enjoys cooking with his wife and daughters, practicing Brazilian Jiu Jitsu and playing jazz drums.

[About ADI]

Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing remains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

CONNECT WITH US

aubreydaniels.com/stay-connected

web: aubreydaniels.com

blog: aubreydanielsblog.com

twitter: twitter.com/aubreydaniels

