

## VOCAL: Atomic Habits in the Choral Rehearsal

BY BETSY COOK WEBER

**T**his past February, I was honored to present a session titled “Atomic Habits in the Choral Rehearsal” at the TMEA Clinic/Convention. What I offered was inspired by James Clear’s book *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. Running a choral rehearsal is complex on multiple levels. The complexity keeps the job infinitely interesting and exhilarating, but it also can make our work overwhelming and daunting. Clear’s book helps validate what I have known to be true during four decades in this business—*focusing on and celebrating tiny victories is the secret to choral director happiness*. While Clear didn’t write this book for choral directors, some of his precepts fall beautifully in line with our vocation.

As Clear describes it, a habit is a behavior that is repeated enough times to become automatic. The ultimate purpose of developing habits is to solve the problems of life with as little energy and effort as possible. For example, we don’t really think about brushing our teeth while we are performing that task. That habit is so ingrained and automatic that we perform the task while thinking about something else entirely.

The following are a few examples of building positive atomic habits to help mitigate problems and positively impact your work and support student success:

**Problem #1:** Wasted time while singers enter the room before the bell/downbeat and a lack of focus once rehearsal begins.

**Habit #1:** At the University of Houston, students come in and immediately begin reviewing the test passage for the day under the leadership of our undergraduate student director. This is optional, but everyone takes advantage of the opportunity. When I taught high school, the students had a sightreading example to study as they came into the room.

Clear says that *productivity is compounding*. Accomplishing one extra task is a small feat on any given day, but each adds up over an entire career—the more tasks you can handle without thinking, the more your brain is free to focus on other areas.

I apply this concept by allowing singers to help with every task possible, large and small. When I do this, not only does my mind have less detritus to focus on, but the singers also develop more ownership. *They buy in*. The constant need to motivate dissipates as the traditional top-down leadership model evolves into true collaboration.

**Problem #2 (a):** Singers on the back row are less engaged than singers on the front.

**Habit #2 (a):** Rotate rows at every rehearsal.

**Problem #2 (b):** The director can’t remember which row is in front/back from day to day.

**Habit #2 (b):** Assign a student to keep track of this and to post the order before the day’s rehearsal.

Clear also encourages us to focus less on goals and more on systems. If your goal is to have a UIL Sweepstakes-worthy choral program, you’ll be frustrated during the years before achieving that goal. If, instead, your goal is to *instill habits that create an atmosphere of excellence and ownership*, then feelings of joy and accomplishment can take place (almost) daily. The difference is in thinking at a granular or, in Clear’s words, at an *atomic level*. Let’s be honest, if the tiny, non-musical aspects of your rehearsals aren’t efficient and orderly, musical excellence is highly unlikely. Learn to rejoice in the trajectory of your program.


**Problem #3:** Distributing and collecting musical scores is a disorganized mess and requires an unreasonable amount of time.

**Habit #3:** Student section leaders oversee all choral library tasks for their sections, including issuing, collecting, filing, checking for score markings, etc.

We can also apply the *systems versus goals* philosophy to our careers. Educators sometimes view their current position as a steppingstone to a perceived ultimate position, such as a head high school director or a collegiate professor. While focused on that goal, they miss fully investing in and enjoying their current job. They neglect the tiny habits that are essential to supporting their work, whether it be in a classroom with elementary students or on stage with a symphony. Being so focused on what they haven’t attained, they don’t find true joy in where they are. Because they haven’t achieved excellence where they are, theirs is *not* the name that comes to mind when new positions emerge. It can become a professional vicious cycle.

**Problem #4:** A director believes they are being unfairly passed over for opportunities.

**Habit #4:** The only way to demonstrate you are ready for the next job is to do excellent work in your current position. Work for excellence in every aspect of what you are doing now.

It’s never too late to start building atomic habits, so I hope you take time to think through how these ideas can positively impact your daily work and support of your students. 



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