

Small Changes Build Strong Leaders: A Leadership Reflection on Atomic Habits

James Snyder
2025SpringB-X-OGL482

Dr. Janice Lawhorn

Date: 03/27/2025

Introduction

“Success is the product of daily habits, not once-in-a-lifetime transformations.” This line from James Clear’s “Atomic Habits” is more than a catchy quote, it’s a principle that has transformed the way I view leadership, growth, and resilience. As I near the completion of my Organizational Leadership degree, I’ve had the opportunity to reflect not only on the lessons I’ve learned academically, but also the habits that have shaped me throughout my 35-year career.

Clear’s story of rebuilding his life after a devastating baseball injury resonated deeply with me. His journey and the framework he developed illustrate something I’ve witnessed repeatedly in leadership: *“it’s not the dramatic moments, but the consistent, invisible work that defines who we become.”* This paper is both a critical analysis of “Atomic Habits” and a reflection on my own leadership identity, structured around one key idea that echoes throughout: Small changes build strong leaders.

James Clear’s Story: From Injury to Identity

Clear’s near-fatal baseball accident could have ended everything. Instead, it became the moment that forced him to slow down and rebuild, one habit at a time. His slow recovery, learning to focus, regain physical control, and succeed academically revealed to him (and to readers) that identity is not found in the big wins, but in small actions, repeated consistently.

This story hit home for me. Like Clear, I’ve experienced setbacks that required reevaluation. And like him, I discovered that rebuilding my identity as a leader came not

through force of will alone, but by changing my systems, refining my habits, and aligning my behavior with who I wanted to become. Small changes build strong leaders.

The Power of Identity-Based Habits

The biggest lesson from the book, and one that's reshaped my approach to leadership is the idea of identity-based habits. Clear writes, "Every action you take is a vote for the type of person you wish to become." This insight reframes leadership from being task-based to being character-based. It's not about checking off lists or hitting metrics; it's about becoming a leader who is dependable, empathetic, and growth-oriented.

This connected strongly to my reflections from OGL 300 (Theory and Practice of Leadership), especially discussions around Transformational Leadership. Great leaders don't just manage, they inspire. They help others grow by modeling the behaviors they expect, and by becoming trustworthy through consistent, values-based action. I am reminded again of Zig Zigler's quote "If you help enough people get out of life what they want, you will get what you want."

Environment Design and Systems Thinking

Another critical insight is that environment matters more than willpower. Clear's assertion that "you do not rise to the level of your goals; you fall to the level of your systems" reframed how I think about building effective teams. In leadership, we often emphasize motivation. But this book reminded me that a leader's role is also to design an environment that encourages success through workflows, expectations, and culture.

This tied in directly with lessons from Foundations of Organizational Leadership, where Peter Senge's Learning Organization theory encouraged the development of systems that support continual learning. As a VP of sales managing remote teams, I've applied this by creating repeatable processes and rituals that support trust, communication, and performance.

Connecting to My Leadership Journey

Over the course of my career, I've led teams through mergers, rebranding, market changes, and more. But the most effective changes I've ever made both personally and professionally were often the smallest. Writing a thank-you note. Starting my day with clarity and planning. Asking questions rather than giving answers. These seemingly minor actions shape who I am as a leader.

Reading "Atomic Habits" gave me language and structure for what I've practiced intuitively. I've learned that small changes build strong leaders and that leadership is built not in grand speeches but in quiet consistency.

Differences from Other OGL Courses

What makes "Atomic Habits" unique among leadership readings is its focus on behavior change through habit formation rather than leadership theory. It offers tactical, repeatable actions, unlike many leadership texts which are heavier on philosophy than practice. It has added a practical, personal layer to my academic learning filling the space between theory and real-world execution.

Where many OGL courses focus on frameworks, “Atomic Habits” shows how to operationalize those frameworks. It’s the “how” to the “what” of leadership education.

Future Applications and Impact

After reading this book, I’ve committed to using its lessons to coach future leaders, especially young professionals entering leadership roles for the first time. I want to help them understand that leadership is not built in a day. It’s built in habits: showing up, listening, supporting others, and making small improvements daily.

Whether I’m mentoring team members or designing onboarding systems, “Atomic Habits” will guide my approach. I plan to incorporate its ideas into performance planning, team development, and even personal goal-setting. Small changes build strong leaders.

If I Could Ask the Author One Question

If I had the opportunity, I would ask James Clear: How do you recommend scaling identity-based habits across a team or an organization? The book is brilliant at the individual level, but I’d love to know how he envisions this being implemented in larger systems. As someone who leads across departments and states, this would offer insight into expanding his work beyond the individual to organizational culture.

Conclusion

“Atomic Habits” is more than a self-help book, it’s a leadership manual in disguise.

James Clear’s message that small, consistent actions shape who we become reinforced

everything I've learned throughout my Organizational Leadership journey. It reminded me that setbacks can become starting points, that systems matter, and that leadership is built over time, not in a single moment of triumph.

This paper, and the reflection behind it, is something I will proudly include in my e-portfolio. It reflects not only my growth as a leader, but also how I've begun putting theory into practice. It shows who I've become and more importantly, who I'm still becoming. Because at the end of the day, every action is a vote for the kind of leader I want to be. And I'm still casting votes.

Small changes build strong leaders. As Clear illustrates, the stonecutter works every day, chiseling one strike at a time to achieve the final vision...

References

Clear, J. (2018). *Atomic habits: An easy & proven way to build good habits & break bad ones*. Avery.

Ziglar, Z. (2000). *See you at the top* (25th anniversary ed.). Pelican Publishing.