

Fitbit and the Power of Feedback



Photo by Pete Markham.

A few months ago, my generous friend [Sue Bethanis](#) gave me a [Fitbit](#). When you clip one of these little one-inch devices onto your belt loop, they track how many steps and stairs you walk in a day. Though I have long taught the power of feedback to adjust behavior, this was a great reminder of how tracking our behavior can lead to new ideas for new practices and ultimately, to being more alive in the world.

Initially, I didn't really think I needed it – I exercise regularly, stay fit, and feel healthy. However, I was curious to see how many steps I walk on an average day of movement. 2,000? 10,000? 20,000? I had no idea.

When I eventually did attach the Fitbit to my clothing, I found myself wanting to put it in my pocket, so it would be easier to check it to see how many steps I had just gotten for walking from my office to the kitchen, from my house to grocery store, and during the preparation of an elaborate

meal. I especially wanted to see how many stairs I got for walking my son to school up and down the very steep and very large hills of San Francisco!

I was surprised to see how few steps I had on a day that I was “heads down” with a lot of phone calls and work at my computer. Not surprisingly, I noticed those were also days my body didn’t feel as good and I felt a little grumpy.

I was also surprised to see that it didn’t take much movement to accumulate steps. Just going out my front door and up the hill for a few blocks and back got me close to a thousand steps. And it took less than 10 minutes! Plus it was so refreshing to get outside, feel the sun or fog of San Francisco on my face, listen to the birds, and get my heart pumping.

In the past, I have usually not bothered running, walking, or working out unless I had a minimum of 30 minutes. My preference was an hour. As a result of tracking my steps however, I discovered that a few ten-minute walks in the middle of day significantly increased my steps count, refreshed my body and soul, and got me thinking more clearly!

For the first time in my life, I am no longer only exercising when I have a big chunk of time; I am also getting exercise in quick bursts. I see now that I am way more productive (and happier) when I take breaks. All thanks to a little bit of real time feedback.

Last year, I devoured the book, [The Way We are Working Isn't Working](#). I was talking to everyone about it, saying it should be required reading for *anyone* who works but especially leaders who dictate how *other* people work. The author, [Tony Schwartz](#), cites all kinds of neuroscience research on the value of taking breaks (even naps!) to refresh your mind.

In spite of being inspired by the book, I didn’t start taking more breaks! Instead, it was the real-time feedback that

sparked my curiosity. Curiosity led to experimentation. Experimentation led to a new practice and a new way of being.

What are you curious about in your work and life? How might you incorporate real-time feedback to help you discover a useful experiment to run? Would love to hear your stories!