



by Mike S. Burke

[On his blog](#), author James Clear talks about “[Keystone Habits](#),” habits that will act as the foundation for other positive habits and translate into a better overall lifestyle. However, I submit not all keystone habits are positive. For the purpose of this article, I would like to focus on these negative keystone habits and how they can act as the foundation for other negative habits to take root and corrode culture. As we explore this premise, ask yourself, “what keystone habits are bringing my organizational culture down?” What effects are they having that individuals do not see or understand? For many, these habits may bring satisfaction and even be part of the organization’s identity. I’ve noticed after 22 years that some of these habits prevent units from maintaining a positive culture.. So when we identify them, what do we do?

As a leader, you must possess maturity and wisdom to understand that some of the microcultures and keystone habits within your organization are actually harming it. You don’t necessarily need to be a dictator or make sweeping decisions without conversation/compromise to correct these harmful behaviors. But you do have to do something. Talk to trusted agents in the organization and discuss the long-term strategy.

Gather around a whiteboard or use mind mapping exercises to think through and understand the secondary and tertiary effects of your proposed change. The goal is to create something that will have depth and lasting power.

Above all, you need to ask yourself the hard question: *what are the negative keystone habits that are hurting the organization?*

To help with this discussion, let me give you a personal account of how this played out for me. I took responsibility of an organization on a Friday. On Saturday, an NCO in the organization got a DUI, his second that month. On Sunday, he received another one. He obviously had a drinking problem. As I began to peel back the layers, I realized that this unit had a drinking problem. Further inspection revealed a large bar located in the unit footprint, fully stocked with two kegs always on tap. Peeling back the layers even further, I learned that every Friday, at close of business, was an NCO call where everyone would lose all sense of professional bearing. Additionally, it was not uncommon for leaders to walk into my office after 1700 with a beer in their hand. It was the accepted climate, and it was creating huge issues in the unit's culture.

After long conversations with the commander, the keystone habit was identified and we needed to make a change. We pulled the senior leadership in and tried to help them understand how this was detrimental to the unit. There was some agreement, but not much buy-in. After further discussion, we implemented a dry footprint. From that moment on, no alcohol would be allowed in the building. This was met with some grumbling, but when we included the bar in that conversation, we had death stares. We then announced that the upcoming holiday party would be alcohol free and we feared for our lives.

To say these decisions were unpopular would be an understatement. The morning after the announcement, I was greeted at work with a large banner over the doorway that read, "The beatings will continue until morale improves." Gauging the climate, we thought for sure a mutiny was brewing.

Six months later, DUIs were nonexistent in the organization. The team was more productive and there were fewer distractors. While we were able to acknowledge that progress had been made, we also understood that we were not quite finished; morale truly was low and people openly proclaimed that our organization was all business and no fun.

Another three months later, we held a unit party at the local lake. Alcohol was purchased with a thoughtful plan ensuring no one would drive intoxicated. During opening remarks, the commander climbed onto a picnic table and gave one of the best speeches I've heard

about professionalism and what is expected of the members of the unit. The next 15 months as a leader in that unit were some of the best of my professional career. That team eventually became one of the closest I have ever worked for and it was amazing what we were able to accomplish together. We sacrificed the short-term climate and achieved a long-term, amazing culture.

What are your thoughts, ideas, and concerns? We need them across the DoD and across our society. Let's start with common ground by agreeing that we have negative keystone habits that are corrosive to our profession and society. Are we willing to make the short-term sacrifices that may cause some discomfort to improve the long-term culture? Are we being honest about these habits within our formations?

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