

Good Habits Don't Take Days Off

On experience, confidence, and what you actually bring to the tools you use

Mike Thomas · Founder & Director · 6 min read · June 2026

Put a tomato on a kitchen counter and ask three people what to do with it.

The first thinks bruschetta. The second, a salad — tomato, feta, balsamic. The third goes straight to roasted tomato and pepper soup, because it's simple: throw things in the oven, blend it, done. They've made it a hundred times. It's what they know.

None of these are wrong. But none of them are about the tomato.

They're about the person looking at it — what they've cooked before, what they're confident attempting, how adventurous they're willing to be with the ingredients in front of them. The tomato is identical in each case. The outcome is entirely different. And here's the question that actually matters: would any of them think to try the air fryer? Would any of them wonder whether a different method might work just as well — or better?

Same ingredient. Same kitchen. Completely different results, based entirely on what each person brings to it.

This is true of almost every tool, technique, or practice we use. The kit doesn't change. The person does.

— Currency and the person holding it

There's a concept I come back to regularly in this work — one I've explored at length elsewhere — which I think of as Currency. Staying current in your field, your practice, your understanding of the people you work with. The idea that knowledge has a shelf life, and that what served you well five years ago may not be what the situation in front of you needs today. *(You can read that piece in full at www.outside-in.online/articles/currency.)*

But Currency isn't just about staying up to date. It's about what you do with what you know. And that depends on something harder to measure than a qualification or a CPD log.

It depends on experience. On knowledge. And — perhaps most of all — on confidence.

Confidence is the variable that changes what you can do with what you have. Not arrogance — confidence. The quiet assurance that comes from having tested something, understood it, and built enough of a track record with it to know when to trust it, and when to deviate from your norm.

Without it, even excellent tools produce mediocre outcomes. With it, ordinary tools become something else entirely.

— J and F

A few years ago I was working on a programme in mainland China — around 150 students, fourteen and fifteen years old, first day. Our first gathering with staff over lunch.

I watched two people working the room.

The first — call them J — was a manager. More experienced on paper. J moved from table to table, asking questions: what time did you have to wake up? Were you already packed? How was the journey? Students answered. J moved on.

The second — call them F — was an instructor. Less senior, less experienced by any formal measure. F asked almost exactly the same questions. But then, depending on what a student said, F asked another one. And another. Not scripted follow-ups — genuine ones, shaped by the answer that had just been given.

The difference was immediate and profound. Students responded to F in a way they never did to J. They could tell — within minutes — that J was doing the rounds, fulfilling a function, while F was actually listening. By the end of the first week, every student knew F's name, said hello in the corridor, sought him out. By the end of the programme — nearly two weeks in — there were students who still couldn't remember who J was.

Same kit. Same questions. Same lunch hall. Same group of students.

Completely different person using them.

— What the tool can't do for you

This is the thing that's easy to miss when we focus on techniques, frameworks, and best practice: the tool is not the practice. The tool is the starting point. What happens from there depends on the person holding it.

J had the questions. F had the questions too — and the confidence, the curiosity, and the genuine interest to go wherever the answers led. That isn't a technique. It's not something you can pick up from a training manual or replicate by following the same script more carefully.

It comes from experience — having been in enough conversations to know what a real answer sounds like, and what a polite deflection sounds like. From knowledge — understanding why the opening exchanges of a programme matter, what you're actually trying to build in those first hours. And from confidence — the willingness to go off-script, to sit with an unexpected answer, to follow a thread you didn't plan for.

The same is true in any field. A skilled facilitator and a competent one can stand in the same room with the same group using the same methodology — and produce entirely different experiences. A coach and a manager can ask the same question — and one opens something up while the other closes it down.

We talk about tools as though acquiring them is the work. It isn't. The work is developing the person who uses them.

— Checking before you commit

There's a discipline in climbing that transfers to almost everything else: you check before you trust.

You tap the hold before you weight it. You test the anchor before you back off the edge. You run the system before you put a person in it. Not because you assume failure — but because the cost of not checking is too high, and the habit of checking keeps you sharp. It slows you down just enough to stay present.

The same applies when you're trying something new — a technique, a device, an approach you haven't used before. You don't hand it to someone else until you understand it yourself. You don't trust it in a live situation until you've tested it somewhere lower-stakes. You build enough familiarity with it to know its limits — and your own — before you commit.

This isn't caution for its own sake. It's the difference between confidence and assumption. Assumption is what gets people into trouble — the sense that because something worked before, it will work now, in this context, with this group, under these conditions. Confidence is knowing why it worked, what the variables are, and what to do when one of them changes.

— Staying open

Expertise has a hidden cost: the better you get at one approach, the harder it can be to see the others. What's commonly accepted becomes what you accept. What you've always done becomes what's always done.

Innovation — in any field — tends to come from people willing to ask whether the accepted way is the only way, or just the most familiar one. Not to reject experience, but to keep it in conversation with curiosity. The air fryer question. The different knot. The follow-up nobody else thought to ask.

The discipline is this: keep your knowledge as broad and your ability to acquire new knowledge as open as you can manage. Not at the expense of depth — depth is what gives you the confidence to test something new. But not so deep that you stop noticing what you might be missing.

Same kit. The person holding it is always the variable that matters most.

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