“M"y dad was a 2 Star General. I learnt some great life-long attitudes and habits from him," said Penny Wing, participant in a group I worked with in London earlier this year.

“Every morning I would wake up to him knocking on my door saying: ’Time to get up. Another day in which to excel'.

“One of his other favourite maxims was: ’Make the bed as soon as you get out of it’.

“His rationale – no matter how your day goes you have accomplished one thing. Even if you have a bad day you return to a well-made bed.”

In a moment we'll look at how this applies to schools. But first a confession.

As Penny shared her Dad’s wisdom on that hot London day I had a flashback to a younger Robyn. In my earlier adult years I was a very sloppy housekeeper. It was my lovely mother-in-law who triggered my transformation. Molly’s house-keeping methods were far superior to mine. She never criticised my untidiness but I began to notice the sense of calm when I walked into her house, even if my six little kids were running in behind (or ahead of) me. Her home was always tidy, well-maintained and attractive. Bit by bit, using her as an aspirational model, my methods improved. One of those practices was to make the bed before leaving the bedroom.

As well as setting the tone for the whole day, if you put clothes away and leave the bathroom tidy as well, at least one section of the home isn't shrieking ‘don’t let anyone come in here – it's a mess!’ It seems obvious once you get into the habit of it, but many people live with messy bedrooms and frequently unmade beds. (The same principle applies in every other room of the house – bottom line: put away as you go.)

If you're struggling in this area, you might also get value from an encouraging role model.

Two simple techniques to go from Messy Martha/Matthew to Organised Odette/Oliver
This simple domestic habit also has relevance in schools, for both teachers and students. What we’re really talking about is the value of:

- The Habit of Momentum
- The Habit of Completion.

How do we build or capitalise on momentum?
In a car, think of how much faster you go through a set of lights if your wheels are still turning when the light turns green than if you're stationary when it changes.

It’s easier to keep going on any activity when you're doing other similar tasks. Phone calls, email, filing or other paperwork – it’s faster and more efficient to batch or chunk similar activities than to chop and change constantly.

And what about completion?
In a school, think how quickly the whole place would sink into chaos if students didn’t put sports gear away as soon as they’d finished with it, or library books weren’t replaced on the correct shelves – and that’s just for starters.

Putting things away as you finish with them or at the next natural break is a simple and very visible example of the habit of completion. However, this really powerful success habit is a struggle for many people. How many teachers have messy work stations? Quite a few, in my observation.

Especially when something is demanding attention, you’ve got someone waiting, or you’re
about to dash out the door to an appointment, the temptation is to think ‘I’ll get back to that later’, and move on to the new activity. The old task is completed or taken as far as it needs to go. The pressure is off. The new activity is more interesting, or more urgent. The natural thing is to want to move forward.

But there is a better way. Here’s another personal experience to illustrate it.

I spent years learning to finish things. Until I did learn it, life seemed to be one long disorganised roller-coaster, lurching from task to task with nothing ever quite completed. Occasionally I’d step back objectively and notice that a task was about 90–95 per cent done, but the feeling of satisfaction for a job well done often seemed elusive and out-of-reach. Finally I noticed it was because items were often not put away at the end of an activity, or a small part was left undone. I lived in a tension of nothing’s-quite-finished. As most of us have experienced, a sense of incompleteness compounds stress and a sense of ‘too much to do’. The common result is an overwhelming feeling of incompletion.

Even after becoming a time management specialist I still had times where the old habits would sneak up and I’d find myself in another pickle. Then one day there was a breakthrough. I’d been working on a big task that involved many files. They were strewn all over the large office table. The task was completed and an appointment was looming. As I looked at the desk the thought was, “Oh dear, it will take ages to put this all away. I’ll do it when I get back.”

At the back of my mind a little voice said, “Robyn, do it now. It won’t take long.”

So, at first reluctantly, I started. The momentum quickly built. There was time urgency anyway but to my surprise it took only a couple of minutes to throw the files together and place them in the cupboards. Decisions were quick and easy to make for I’d just finished working with the papers and everything was top-of-mind.

A few hours later I returned from my appointment. Walking in the door, head full of the new work required, my eyes fell on the tidy tidy table. A memory of the earlier battlefield flashed across my mental screen, followed instantly by a wonderful surge of relief. In that moment I realised that, had the clean-up been delayed, it would have taken at least 15 minutes to sort on my return. And I probably would have said, as so many do, “I’ll get round to it when I have time”. Consequence? The mess would have sat there for days, an invisible but very real mental burden, slowing down the creativity required for the next task.

Now, as soon as a task is finished the paperwork or item is immediately put away if its destination is within arms’ reach. If it’s going further away in the office or to another room I make a pile on the floor and pick it up at the next natural break. It takes only moments to return things when you’ve just been working on them, filing of both papers and equipment becomes an invisible non-task, and your office (or home) always looks tidy.

Last tip: Enjoy the journey. Sometimes you’ll slip up but the benefits become their own reward. Before you know it you’ll have the completion habit mastered.