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CASE IN POINT

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The Pursuit of Seamless Imperfection

How accepting flaws produces better results



BY VERGIL METTS, PHD

Look closely at the finest silk, and you'll find countless anomalies in the individual strands. Each is quite rough observed under the microscope. But woven together, each imperfect strand helps produce a fabric that is smooth. This contrast between flawed parts and beautiful whole stands for an idea related to workplace efficiency: the pursuit of seamless *imperfection*.

In a way, seamless imperfection is what we all strive to achieve. It's not that we intentionally aim for imperfection. Instead, we strive to create a seamlessly positive experience for our clients, despite the imperfections we must endure along the way. Carried a step further, it would seem futile to hold ourselves to a standard of eliminating all imperfections in our work. By the same logic, it's in our best interests to do our very best to weave those imperfections into a fabric of impeccable quality. Flaws in the threads are acceptable, as long as the cloth doesn't have a hole.

So it is with people. A major league baseball player isn't judged by a single performance at the plate, but rather by his season-long batting average, home run and RBI totals, and other measures. Even from the hands of a master like Monet, one single, imperfect brush stroke does nothing to inspire. Blended with thousands more, that one stroke helps to craft an Impressionist masterpiece. Seamless imperfection works on the idea that we don't give our best to the world if our focus is on ferreting out our weaknesses and working endlessly to overcome each and every one.

SPENDING TIME AND ENERGY WISELY

We are at our best when we acknowledge our weaknesses but don't spend our limited energy trying to overcome every one, and instead put that energy into those things we do best and that energize us even more.

The renowned researcher and motivational speaker Marcus Buckingham talks extensively about applying positive psychology to the workplace. He looks at strengths and weaknesses in an incredibly useful way. Buckingham defines weaknesses not only as things we are not particularly good at, but also as things that we do well but that sap our energy, making us feel weak in doing them. Our strengths, however, embolden us when we

apply them, providing great satisfaction along the way.

Step one in Buckingham's approach is coming to terms with your biggest weaknesses, identifying not necessarily what you're not good at, but what you don't like to do. Then, find a way to turn tasks that require using that weakness into a fun experience.

Buckingham used himself as an example, admitting that he abhors small talk, dreading those sometimes necessary one-on-ones with unfamiliar souls at the likes of cocktail parties, and the pressure that comes with faking a meaningful connection. He also acknowledged how he loves interviewing people to determine their secrets to success. His self-prescribed advice: turn the weakening process of small talk into an interview, getting the other person to talk at length about themselves. Approached now from a standpoint of strength, the entire task is reframed and the outcome more satisfying for everyone involved.

TWO WRONGS REALLY DO MAKE A RIGHT

We've all heard the saying that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, and that is true. It's not true, however, that a fabric is only as strong as its weakest thread, and in part why a solely hierarchical approach to management has partially given way to a more team-oriented structure. If something goes awry with one of the links in a purely hierarchical structure, the system is likely to fail. Not so when the imperfect talents of organization members are woven into a closely-knit team.

The military offers a seminal example of how the two approaches can coexist. You won't find a more vertically aligned decision-making structure, but one that also requires the ultimate in teamwork. In combat situations, "got your back" means exactly what it says. Working as a unit and covering for one another, platoons of individually imperfect soldiers compensate for one another's weaknesses to carry out complex missions. The world's best collection of perfect soldiers, acting individually, wouldn't stand a chance against a "seamlessly imperfect" unit.

KNOW YOUR WEAKNESSES, MAKE BETTER CHOICES


Coming to terms with your weaknesses can pay huge dividends by helping you make better choices. What should I be doing, and what must I leave for others? It comes back to assembling a team of individually imperfect individuals, one's own self included, for a better end result. Demanding in everything we do focuses us too closely on individual tasks, and off the big picture. It saps energy, creates stress and magnifies error making.

The world became a better place for me the day I finally acknowledged my serious lack of organization. That was step one, followed by the clear next step of hiring someone terrific at keeping me organized. Done and done.

Well, not quite. Step three became replacing that person with someone not just naturally organized with someone who actually enjoyed keeping others organized. As good as that first

person was, it was always service with a frown, and an eye-roll. There was a constant "I can't believe you can't do this for yourself" undertone, which was not only unpleasant to be around, but impeded her best work. The takeaway beyond strength and weakness theory: in making hiring decisions, assess not only raw talent, but enthusiasm. If someone gets excited talking about something they also demonstrate mastery of, you may well have a winner.

Of course, some occupations demand the very highest levels of quality, with much of healthcare a prime example. Here, the pursuit of perfection is worth the effort. But where absolute perfection isn't required, perhaps it's time we learn to *satisfice*—a satisfaction-sufficing hybrid that recognizes every task has an optimal point, where incremental gains in quality diminish in proportion to additional time spent. The question becomes, what are the valid performance standards, if a less than perfect result is acceptable?

Don't confuse ideas like seamless imperfection and satisficing as contradictory with being your best. They are, in fact, quite doable ways to be precisely that. 

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