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A Few Guidelines to Efficiency

IN A SIMPLER WORLD the pioneer could follow the lead of his instinct in tackling jobs, but in the complex life of today we need consciously to apply efficiency even in making a plan for doing the chores.

Efficiency gets things done in the smoothest way, with least wear and tear, and with the smallest expenditure of energy. This involves a certain amount of thinking. One must observe, and apply knowledge and experience to the circumstances, and decide what is to be done and how to do it. An efficient person will use facts and skill: he needs also good judgment.

To the gifted craftsman, whatever his occupation, his work has dignity. There is a simple but pleasurable grace in the pursuit of everyday jobs as if they were the liberal arts.

What is excellent in work varies with the purpose, and the material, time, and energy available. John Ruskin reminded us that work may be wasted by being too good for its material or too fine to bear exposure to the elements.

Precision is vital in many manufactured articles, but the degree varies according to the requirements of the product. While a tolerance of an eighth of an inch may be allowable in fitting a wheel to a wheelbarrow, it would be grossly inefficient in an electronic device where tolerances are measured in thousandths of an inch.

Some ingredients of efficiency are: knowledge, time, energy and material. One of the most important of these is time. Procrastination is the great enemy of efficient time use. Putting off necessary tasks causes additional labour, and reduces the time that is available for the development of new ideas.

The person who is striving for efficiency needs a good head of steam. No machine that is a hundred per cent efficient has ever been invented, but engineers keep working on the problem of increasing the percentage of energy the machine uses.

Here is an example from track sport, given to us by Walter B. Pitkin in *More Power to You*. To some persons the act of running may seem to be a simple activity: you merely move your legs faster than in

walking. But one who races knows better. The old style called upon a runner to fling his advancing foot as far forward as possible. It came to earth somewhat in front of the runner's body, acting as a momentary brake on the body's forward motion. Then runners learned to keep the body ahead of the advancing foot. This eliminates the waste of energy in lifting the runner over his advanced foot.

Economy of energy is illustrated in the kitchen, where compact grouping of sink, stove, refrigerator, cupboards and counters reduces the amount of walking needed in preparing a meal, and in the workshop, where planned arrangement of tools reduces the waste of time and energy used in searching for them.

To continue to work in an efficient manner requires the worker to keep informed of what is happening in his profession or trade. An effective person does not allow changing circumstances to escape his notice, but makes an adjustment of thought and action to cope with the altered situations.

Facing difficulties

The person who works efficiently is in good position to face difficulties with assurance. He has, in fact, an inclination to look for and to like difficult tasks, because it is in doing them that he shows his worth.

When difficulties thicken upon him, the efficient person has the tendency to persevere. He recognizes the problems and anxieties that may arise in a task, but does not dwell upon them. He knows that he is displaying the highest quality of efficiency when he tackles a job that is extremely tough and does it so that the result approaches perfection.

To such a person a check to progress is temporary. The measure of his efficiency is what he succeeds in doing in spite of unfavourable circumstances rather than because of favourable circumstances. Great works of scholarship, of creative skill, and of technical complexity have been carried to conclusion under disadvantageous conditions.

The person who persists in trying, using the best

means he knows of, is likely to attain efficiency even if he has but ordinary intellectual gifts. He is wiser and more competent today than he was yesterday, because he is constantly learning.

To the efficient person a mistake is part of his learning process. He is not always on top of the world: even the great musicians and painters have their comparatively uninspired periods.

Every person who contributes anything significant to life is wrong some of the time: that is why pencils have erasers, but the eraser should not wear out ahead of the lead.

Purpose and enterprise

The efficient person does not indulge in restless change. He has something specific, concrete and definite to do. He knows that hitting a nail on the head is a praiseworthy action, but only if the nail is needed and is in the right place.

He uses his imagination to put together ideas, to picture what might be done better, and to originate. Ideas of genius status do not spring from a heap of unrelated memories, but from facts that have been mentally sorted and stored in an orderly way.

Success at this point depends upon the enterprise a person used in observing, selecting and filing facts and experiences. There is no place in a person's career where he may stop these processes and continue to do effective work.

Being efficient is far from meaning that you have fixated on a level of competence; your ideal is not having and resting but growing and becoming. You see not only the job on which you are working competently, but what may lie over the horizon, and you prepare for it.

An efficient person does not trust to the blind force of nature or the trend of fate. The person who is tough-minded about getting on in his profession or job will cultivate qualities of initiative and venturesomeness. He shows enterprise in planning, initiative in starting and perseverance in doing. An explorer may have a safe and comfortable camp, but he does not discover new territory unless he gets out and climbs a mountain or a tree.

No job, however well done, is terminal. Something else succeeds it. Efficiency does not mean clinging to the *status quo*. In fact, it may be said that in today's industrial and business life there is no *status quo* but only a changing pattern of obsolescence and innovation. New products and new ways of doing things replace old ones while the old ones are still new.

Nevertheless, the person practising efficiency is slow to believe in novelties. He does not chop and change merely for the purpose of doing something differently. He knows that wisdom in business and private life, as in government, consists in making such changes as are needed at this particular time under prevailing conditions, without making greater changes than are necessary. He trims his sails, over which he has control,

to cope with the varying wind, which he cannot control.

A person who is whole-hearted in his work and keeps his mind open to new thoughts is already more than half way toward becoming efficient. His natural ability will be increased by study and his skill enlarged by practice. He knows that he cannot create genius, but he can improve efficiency until his work appears to others to be the product of genius.

Experience is a valuable personal asset, but only if its possessor has learned from it. Information and facts do not carry labels telling how and when to use them. That wisdom arises from thought and practice.

Thorough book knowledge does not make a perfect workman. The finishing touch of the expert is gained by doing: his study is perfected by experience. When applying experience to guide one in a task one must use, in the words of the diplomat briefing a bureaucrat: "the widest possible discretion."

Getting ready

The accumulation of knowledge is a prerequisite to efficiency. Superiority is neither accidental nor a matter of luck. It rests upon a solid basis of preparation suitable to your hopes and aspirations. To write poetry you must study metre, to build bridges you must be learned in the strength of material under various strains and stresses, to operate a business you must develop a sense of trading.

The efficient person knows what the standard is in everything with which he is concerned. His safe rule is to aim for the standard which is the symbol of excellence. What this is can be learned readily by seeking counsel in the best sources: qualified people, books and personal observation. To talk things over with a person who knows about them is far different from chattering about them with a casual acquaintance. To read a book profitably means selecting one that deals in an authoritative way with the subject in which you are interested. Observation entails more than looking: it means paying attention and asking questions.

Make sure that your tools are the best available for your purpose. If you plan to hunt big game you would be foolish to arm yourself with the weapons of our palaeolithic ancestors, though theirs were the best tools of the age in which they lived.

Churchill felt that his efficiency was increased by the array of implements on his desk: buzzers, pens, pencils, tags for joining papers, a paper punch for making holes for the tags, and some red labels reading "Action this day". Other people would find this collection confusing, and they prefer to keep their tools in a desk drawer or in an orderly array on a tool panel.

Preparation for efficiency includes exploring the roots as well as the fruits of life. This enables one to see the conditions that must be met if one is to perform competently. In this research one learns to distinguish

the essential from the unessential, and to simplify both problems and work.

It is foolish for a person to think that by giving his work an air of complexity he attains anything worth while. The efficient person finds his satisfaction in his ability to simplify. He does the big job one step at a time.

Order out of chaos

Before starting a job the efficient person has given form to the operation; he has brought together varying ideas and has thought of various ways of doing the work, and he has shaped a course that he thinks will lead to a favourable result. He knows that the information he has been diligently collecting cannot be left in his mind as a chaos. It must be sorted, ordered, and somehow related to his project. He has made it a habit to classify, to put together those things which are alike, detecting meaningful relationships.

Lists and systems and calculated economy of time, effort and material are senseless fiddle-faddle unless they are put to purposeful use. It is part of efficiency to make a list of jobs to be done, but only if one then sets about doing them. The search for efficiency should not lead a person to become the slave of organization, but should make system his servant.

Efficiency gives some thought to the means to be used toward attaining the objective. It determines the resources and procedures appropriate to the need. This planning of a whole job has been called in the Army the "doctrine of completed staff work."

An efficient person is wide-awake. He walks all around a problem or a proposition. He perceives the unwelcome as well as the welcome facts. He pays attention to the uninteresting details as well as to the features that interest him. He is alert to the unfamiliar as well as to the familiar. He is a realist.

Having assembled the necessary data, a person needs to apply a good sense of proportion so as to assign every part of his task the time and energy it is worth, no more and no less.

Concentration and versatility

Method, simplicity and concentration are the backbone of efficiency in every profession and job.

Concentration means bringing things to a common centre. Once an efficient person has thought through to a conclusion and made plans, he does not go off half-cocked because of something he hears. He refuses to be side-tracked, no matter how pleasing the by-way appears. Thomas Carlyle, the peasant who became one of Britain's great writers, said this: "The weakest living creature, by concentrating his powers on a single object, can accomplish something; the strongest, by dispersing his over many, may fail to accomplish anything."

People are able to be versatile because if they have five irons in the fire they concentrate on one at a time.

It is necessary to be thoroughly efficient in at least one art or skill, but it is well to have in addition competency in several others.

Some painters, like Rembrandt and Rubens were masters of every kind of pictorial subject. Others, like Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, spilled their talent into other avenues of expression. In their many-sided activities they directed their mental and hand skills to manipulation of the job in hand, passing from task to task with ease. While touching life at a great number of points they did not try to advance in all directions at once.

Wisdom, of course, dictates discretion in selecting the unaccustomed things we try to do. A person who is efficient in his own line may be a second-rater in any other line.

Some scientists, some business men, some politicians, and some authors who are very learned in their own lines of activity wrongly consider themselves to have equal ability to judge practical programmes and policy in other areas.

The efficient person's knowledge is not cherished by him as an academic vanity. He puts it into use. The sceptics are so busy scorning work that they leave the way to success wide open to people who believe that the real joy of life is in doing things.

Work that is of any importance demands certain qualities: concentration of mind, enthusiasm for doing it properly, ability to avoid damage and breakdowns, and pleasure in a job well done.

There is a great difference between professional people and people who do not care about their work so long as they are not discharged for their inefficiency. A good worker knows how to apply the skills he has learned, takes delight in setting his own quotas and standards and exceeding them, and is willing when an emergency occurs to put forth a special effort at risk of loss or other set-back.

Knowing that completeness and exactness are two important factors in efficient work, the good worker develops the ability to sustain his interest until his task is completed. He is thorough. He may be the most ardent seeker after future progress, but he dwells in the present long enough to finish the job in hand.

Personal efficiency

The success or failure of any human project turns upon the integrity and capability of a man or a woman. Cicero, who held the highest offices in Rome and wrote books on rhetoric and political and moral philosophy that are still studied, showed wisdom when he remarked: "What Socrates says is very excellent: that the readiest way, and, as it were, shortest cut, to arrive at glory, is really to be what one desires to be accounted."

Personal efficiency includes other qualities than those associated with one's job. Just as a person needs to adapt himself to advancement in the state of his art or science, so he needs to fit himself to constantly

changing social conditions. As in a canoeist running a rapid, it is not back-breaking labour that counts, but coolness, dexterity, knowledge of when to dip the paddle and how to do it, knowledge of the hundred combinations of rock and water.

There is the danger, of course, of concentrating so hard on perfection that a person becomes too ridden by anxiety to be happy. A Chinese philosopher said: "He who stands on tip-toe does not stand firm; He who takes the longest strides is not the fastest walker; He who boasts of what he will do seldom succeeds in all he promises."

Intelligence and principles

In any profession or business or trade, ignorance is the Queen Witch. She can stir up a deadly brew of error and misunderstanding and dissension.

It is a mark of the able mind not to resist blindly or accept blindly but to get to understand. Hasty generalization and offhand opinion are the source of many blunders, and seldom provide the foundation of good judgment.

The intelligent person bases his actions upon clear understanding of sound rules and principles. He does not waste time arguing about how things ought to behave, but tries to learn how they do behave.

Intelligence helps a person to handle today's job, to foresee the future, and to give order and direction to his life. It enables him to understand life's conditions — the conditions on which he continues to live in good health, the conditions on which he holds his job, the conditions on which he turns out excellent work. When he cannot change conditions, he analyses them and adjusts himself to them.

Every competent worker has a point of reference, like the cairn or tablet erected to mark an international boundary, or the gauges placed in rivers to measure their fluctuations. A point of reference becomes a principle, a fixed guide to behaviour and performance. It is not necessarily limited to particular cases, but may be universal. For example, one cannot do what he likes with anything: one can only do what can be done with it.

Problems differ, but reference to principles gives a firm starting point toward their solution. A Roman Emperor-Philosopher wrote: "Let no act be done without a purpose, nor otherwise than according to the perfect principles of art."

To be true to the best principles that he knows is a habit of the efficient person. There are other, less exalted, habits that contribute to efficiency.

In everyday living, efficiency includes making routine doings as habitual and automatic as possible, thus leaving the brain free for consideration of important matters. Professor Alfred North Whitehead wrote: "Civilization advances by extending the number of important operations which we can perform without thinking about them."

Recognition and management

It is not a mark of efficiency to want all other people to acknowledge that you know all that you do know. In many occupations, there is no reward except the feeling that one's task was well done.

The efficient person is too busy keeping up with the changing state of his art or science to have time for grand-standing, and in any event public acclaim is not necessary to his happiness. When people asked why Cato, noted in history because of his exposure of corruption in the public service, had no statue, he answered: "I would much rather be asked why I have not one than why I have one."

People in managerial and supervisory posts are specially interested in maintaining and extending their efficiency. Efficiency in the ground floor workshop or office depends a lot on whether there is a good working team upstairs in the executive offices.

If you are a manager seeking excellence do not forget that people like to work for a person who is good at his job, who is confident of his capability, who sets high standards, and who recognizes these qualities in the persons who work under him.

The efficient manager, while being impatient with dawdlers and incompetents, and having a sharp eye for deviation from standards, is careful to respect the need for communication with his workers. Executives especially need to be careful to consult those who can make or mar their plans.

On the positive side an example of efficiency in action is given by the planning of Napoleon. His formula was: work with your ministers twice a week — once with each of them separately, and once with all of them together in Council. You are likely to carry all of them along with your project when they realize that you are ready to listen to their ideas.

Be confident

Having worked up your plans with the greatest efficiency you can command, whether they are plans for business expansion or solving a household problem, move with confidence. Knowledge that you have prepared efficiently raises your morale, and your cheerful, confident and zealous manner will inspire others with a sense of purpose, enthusiasm, and a feeling for success.

What then is our aim? To direct our expenditure of energy and time toward a purpose with the best principles to guide us. We will use patience and enthusiasm, tact and vigour, a single mind to the job in hand. We will have planned imaginatively, used careful co-ordination of resources, and acted with determination.

This may appear to be a large order, and in truth it is, but it is the only known way to move from mediocrity to excellence. Being efficient means the difference between wavering performance and fixed indubitable achievement. A person's efficiency is the secret of his value to the world.