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In Pursuit of Efficiency

EFFICIENCY IS THE MAGIC INGREDIENT which transmutes vague wavering capability into indubitable performance. It means knowing the job, organizing the work, and carrying it out effectively.

Living in this nuclear age, with its bewildering array of mechanisms and gadgets, people need a way of thinking about things that is adequate to the circumstances of their environment. New scientific discoveries complicate life by posing problems which every man must solve for himself. The power to solve them does not come through chaotic thinking torn by uncertainties.

Everything we do, from buying the week's groceries to managing a factory or searching for life among the stars requires some general policy, a guiding principle. One must see clearly what is involved in the big picture, to view life whole if one is to perform its parts efficiently.

Many people have potential efficiency, but they waste it in bubbling activity because they have outlined no purpose, or they construct their lives out of balance, like the statues in our public parks which have pedestals far more massive than their burdens warrant.

What efficiency is

To be efficient means working with intelligence to produce an intended result. It has to do with economy of effort, productiveness, and the way a job is done. It is a synonym of fit, capable and competent. The efficient man, knowing his job, is effective in action, and his action is effectual in achieving its purpose. To the engineer, efficiency is the maximum of result produced by the minimum of energy.

To be efficient in your garden consists in this: you know many things about the soil, the range of temperatures, the seeds and their growth. You apply this knowledge with wisdom so as to attain the effect you desire. And you add work. The Duke of Windsor, showing off his beautiful rock garden on television, declared proudly: "I placed every stone myself."

Philosophy enters upon our consideration of efficiency because thinking is necessary. Efficiency

cannot be forced upon oneself or one's workers. It must be encouraged and made desirable. It is better, says a proverb, to make men thirsty than to make them drink.

Skill, knowledge, and judgment enter into efficiency, and the person seeking efficiency needs vitality, courage, sensitiveness and intelligence.

Efficiency in using his mind helps a man to make the most of only average ability. He does not waste his emotions on idle impulses, nor does he attach himself thoughtlessly to any vagrant idea that presents itself to his mind. His mind leaps ahead, foresees the benefits or evil consequences, and so accepts one idea and discards another.

There are some in these days who are uninterested in increasing their worth and their efficiency. They point to their hard-working fathers and grandfathers as examples of what they do not want to be. They say: "I want to get some fun out of life." That juvenile attitude takes no account of the fact that being efficient is having fun, that making progress is fun, and that being more worthy is fun.

It is results that count. Administrative ability is tested by the outcome of efforts based upon sound reasoning. If a man cannot deliver the goods, then rank and title do not mean a thing. Efficiency confers status.

There are various degrees of efficiency. The danger is not in failing to reach absolute efficiency: it lies in giving up the effort. Efficiency involves constant over-coming, striving for the best possible.

The efficient man has no room in his life for procrastination. There is a fateful precariousness in standing still, because others are moving and will pass you.

Taking time out for mature deliberation is wise, but it is easy to develop the habit of postponing the making of a difficult decision or launching an important undertaking with the excuse that you must think over the matter longer. It is often necessary to do something at once, the wise thing if you know what it is, but at any rate to do something.

Self-appraisal

Why does one man succeed in a job or in a way of life while other men fail? We must assume that he who succeeds has qualities of some sort or other which the others do not have. It is necessary, if you are to live efficiently, to find out what good traits you have so as to make the best use of them.

Tackling a problem efficiently means turning first of all to yourself to ask what faculty you have for reaching a solution. When you know what your strong points are you gain self-confidence. You know that you are equal to the task.

Self-examination will reveal a wealth of master traits slumbering beneath a weight of listlessness. We are inclined to ignore qualities of value while we slither along doing ordinary things in an ordinary way. The thing to do is to recognize our best parts and play them. One man may have the faculty of giving help to others, though he does not know all the answers to his own problems. One man may be cut out for conducting a long siege rather than for making a quick attack. One man may be a persuasive writer while another is at his best on a public platform.

The quality you find in this self-appraisal may not be of the dominating sort. What helps a man to the top in his trade, business or profession may be a very narrow range of ability which happens to fit the need of society or his job at this particular moment. To find the crucial quality is a big step toward becoming efficient.

Philosophy, as it is applied to efficiency, has no room for bluff or for self-delusion: it is for real. To bluff about your knowledge or skill is to live in fear of being found out, and that is a termite nibbling away at the foundation of your hope of working efficiently.

Imagination and initiative

Some people are confused by talk about imagination. They have always associated it in their minds with fairy tales like Grimm's and tall stories like those of Baron Munchausen. But imagination is something the man seeking to live efficiently must have. His mind must be able to recall past experiences and to cause them to reappear in his consciousness in combinations of great variety. These are the bricks with which a man builds new structures.

Imagination is the difference between routine and efficient men. It gives ability to originate, to invent better ways of doing things, and to combine old ideas with new situations. Everything we now use in technology, medicine, space flight, communication, and business — all the things which go toward making us efficient — were once only imagined. We can with profit let our imaginations roam so as to encompass even the wildest ideas, and then engineer them down to earth.

As the power to think imaginatively and work efficiently grows, creativeness tends to become more

than an effort. It becomes an appetite, a craving that can be most pleasurably satisfied by even greater creative work.

Bringing imagined things down to where they become useful requires initiative and enterprise. When we look into our minds we shall be surprised by how our thinking has been bound hand and foot by some jailer: by habit, laziness, stereotyped ways of looking at things, or some other force that handcuffs us. Initiative will break these fetters and set us on the way toward increasing our efficiency by creative thought and action.

Seldom is efficiency gained by following the rule book reverently. We recall the creative thinking done by Admiral Nelson at the battle of Trafalgar. He told his commanders to ignore the Admiralty's textbook which laid down the rule of the formal line of battle, running parallel to the enemy's fleet. He attacked in two lines at right angles, sailing boldly through Villeneuve's line, breaking the enemy fleet into three easily-managed fragments.

Becoming efficient is a progressive development. You have an idea in your head, you see a blurred picture of something you would like to do or to be. The thing to do is grasp the idea fast and bring the picture into focus. Do not let an idea pass without exploring it.

The search for efficiency does not bow to any force that says "it can't be done" without getting to understand why. The job that is labelled "impossible" should be examined with care. If mature thought convinces you that it can be done, then you will wade into it and do it. You trust your judgment, and avoid the indignity that accompanies indecision and wavering and doubt.

Order and direction

Having decided upon a goal, efficiency in reaching it demands order and direction. Efficiency seldom occurs accidentally or spontaneously. Like all superiority, it rests upon a solid base of preparation. Even if you are a genius, you must take off with caution and soar with safety and land gently.

Making plans and having a schedule is very far from being a slave to routine. The plan opens up time and opportunity to add creative touches, and the schedule keeps you on the track of the important things.

You cannot anticipate everything that may happen. You never know when you enter an office in answer to a call from the boss, or pick up the telephone, or tear open an envelope, just what sort of problem or crisis is about to become part of your life. It is a good rule to expect the unexpected, but planning the known things so far as is possible leaves you free to step out in force to meet the surprise assault. You have reduced the odds against you.

When you have fixed the lines on which you want to travel, concentrate on the job. Dispersion of thought

and effort ruin the best laid plans. To be effective we must fight at the fullest necessary strength.

Some persons may say that they have many things to attend to, and have to be versatile. Concentration is the secret of versatility. It is facility in giving attention to one thing at a time.

The techniques of efficiency

Efficiency cannot be attained merely by dogged devotion to work. Everyone needs a change, a pause, a break, from time to time. This enables him to assess his work and to decide whether he is pursuing permanent and durable interests.

Our technological attainments are accompanied by some disadvantages. Pilgrims used to walk to Mecca over many miles of desert, with plenty of time to think and meditate. Now they go by airplane and arrive at the shrine in advance of their minds.

Meditation is a powerful and rich activity. It is out of meditation that there arise the great artist's colours, the poet's flights into beauty, the scientist's life-saving discoveries, the architect's imposing structures, and the business man's important coups.

Many other ingredients are used in building efficiency: knowledge, analysis, organization, and action.

There is substance to the requirement that one must have knowledge, but more is required than skill in knowing how to do a job. One needs to ask questions, particularly about things that are obvious, if one is to progress toward the greatest efficiency.

Efficiency does not require rounding up every characteristic, for they are unlimited, or can become unlimited if small minds begin nibbling at them. Look for enough major characteristics to make a reasonable decision. You will need only a half dozen questions to test the worth of a television receiver, but perhaps two hundred if you are thinking of buying a television station.

In your preliminary questioning you are not seeking to prove something, but are trying to find the facts. The wisdom of looking at all sides of a proposal cannot be denied. If you have seen the worst that can happen should the action not measure up to expectation, and if at the worst it still seems to be a good proposition, you are justified in going ahead.

The danger in this seeking of facts is that you may become lost in a maze of talk. Efficient talk is talk about means by which to reach desired ends. It uncovers principles and makes an outline of plans. It helps us to avoid starting out with a confused understanding of the thing to be done. It reveals the size of our problem.

One way to keep preliminary investigation on the track is to write down the purpose of your project, its benefits, the two or three possible methods to follow, and the time available in which to work. Locate the problem, set its scope and bounds, collect pertinent information, solve the problem.

Simplify and organize

Simplify wherever possible. Get down to the nub of the matter. Analyse it so as to see clearly its component parts. Lay out a plan for solving the problem or doing the job, taking into account its magnitude, the skill of the person who is to do it and the efficacy of the tools with which it is to be done.

Then organize the job. The man who is deliberately pursuing efficiency as his way of life will do many little things to encourage its development. Having system contributes to efficiency, and it also adds to the safety factor. Without system you have no room for manoeuvre when difficulties arise.

System makes work easier. The practice of looking at papers and handling them without disposing of them is one of our great time wasters, but it has another aspect: it breeds an undue impression of difficulty. Using the wrong tool for a job is another practice which disturbs efficiency. The function of a crowbar is not to enable us to raise anything rapidly, but to raise what is exceedingly heavy.

Disorder is the eternal foe of efficiency. Benjamin Franklin had a precept which he was honest enough to say that he couldn't always follow: "Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time." Under orderly conditions there are more problems solved, fewer trials necessary for a problem, fewer false reactions, and less time consumed.

This principle does not apply only in factories, offices and research laboratories. French housewives are given the opportunity to attend a centre where they study time and motion budgeting. It is said that in eight sessions of two and a half hours each the centre can teach its students working methods which will enable them to cut down by one third the time they spend on household tasks.

The critical moment

All the preparatory efficiency work leads up to the critical moment when you have to start to carry your plan through. Action is the translation of thought into reality. It distinguishes life from vegetating. While meditation remains secluded in the cloister nothing is happening on the outside. Now the time has come to give the ideas life.

Timing is an important factor in efficient action. All of us have ups and downs. During our high periods we do our best work and we think with ease and keen perceptivity. In our low periods we do less work with greater effort, and our thinking is sluggish. These billows of top fitness and troughs of sometimes crippling unfitness may have their origins in some physiological upheaval. The point is to adapt our work to the periodicities, to do our innovating when we are near the top of the wave, and devote the low periods to more routine work.

It is a common human failing to allow the low feel-

ing to drift too long. One has to push hard against inertia.

As to work

An advance in efficiency ordinarily entails a lot of hard work as well as intense concentration. No one can coast uphill.

The chief enjoyment of living stems from activity. It is well and good that man should rest from his labour, but the rest and inactivity are tasteless unless they follow work. Voltaire said: "Not to be occupied and not to exist amount to the same thing."

When a young man gives promise of great genius, the first question to ask about him is: "Does he work?" We live in a work-shy age, an environment which makes it easier for the energetic man to make his way toward the success he seeks.

Part of today's abstention from hard work stems from the labour of past generations. Our ancestors lived in a state of uncertainty, whether tomorrow they should happen upon a square meal or themselves become prey to the forest animals. Our fathers worked because it was part of the ethics of their time, part of the nobility of living, besides being a way to earn a livelihood. They worked to so good effect that today's young people are maintained in leisure until they graduate from school or university. They are deprived of the challenge which spurred past generations.

To work efficiently, a man needs to substitute the idea of growth for the idea of toil, and to make growth the natural and normal expression of himself. The work he does matters more to him than to the world, because upon it depend his mental and physical health.

Whatever mockeries may be directed at work by new thinkers, no one can successfully deny the worth of fruitful labour. It develops concentration of the mind, attentiveness, endurance, enthusiasm, familiarity with fatigue, joy in attainment, and the ability to repair what is spoiled. These give happiness individually, and together they spell satisfaction in life.

About mediocrity

The adage "let well enough alone" has no place in the life of a man seeking efficiency. There is no point at which the efficient man can stop and say "I am." He goes on to declare "I am becoming." He will not be found in the ranks of those timid souls who never know either victory or defeat.

A great artist is seldom quite satisfied with his creation. Quite often, artists delay signing their paintings in the hope of adding some refining touches. Their imaginations have built for them an ideal which they have not yet quite converted into reality on the canvas.

Of course, we cannot expect to solve every problem, however efficient we may become. We must occasionally be satisfied for the time being with a partial solution.

The history of success in any art or science is a story of recommencements.

When a job seems to have you pinned to the mat it may mean that you have taken the wrong grip on it. Break free and try some other hold. Every person who attempts anything significant will make mistakes, but the efficient man will do his best to turn a mischance into an advantage.

Failure, even if it be a plain, unvarnished, complete failure, has a certain dignity, because it is a monument to the fact that a man tried to do something.

Failure is sometimes necessary to show us we are headed in the wrong direction. We can use our mistake as a source of instruction. Instead of dwelling upon explanations and excuses, admit it, rectify it, and push on. As Churchill said: "If you simply take up the attitude of defending it there will be no hope of improvement."

There is a class of persons called futilitarians, people who try to do this or that, but their efforts are futile. By and by they resign themselves to failure. Resignation is seldom the answer to any problem. What is needed is to go back before the beginning of the project and examine your thinking and action step by step in search of the point at which something can be done better.

Recall what the ghost said to the hesitating Hamlet: "This visitation is but to whet thy almost blunted purpose." And think of the poet Shelley. His biographer tells us that Shelley made a blot at the top of a page, but on the rest of the page he wrote a lovely poem. And consider the courage and determination of the Greek youth who was thrown from his chariot in a race recounted in the *Iliad*. He completed the course on foot, pulling his chariot behind him.

Endless attaining

Efficiency involves endless attaining, the pleasure of inexhaustible transfiguration into better ways of doing things. It is the natural outcome of clear thinking, calm judgment, self-control, symmetry of planning and artistry of means.

Your purpose in pursuing the philosophy of efficiency is to find the part you are to play on life's stage; to assure yourself that you are doing the work for which you are best endowed; to know that you are filling a vital need; to make certain that you are meeting your obligations effectively. This search for efficiency will prevent you from becoming merely an embodied function.

And then, having pushed up to a state of efficiency, you need to call upon a new resource, that of standing firmly. There is an appropriate parable in Rome. The Capitoline Hill was where consuls were sworn into office and victorious generals were crowned. At its edge was the Tarpeian Rock, from which criminals and traitors were cast down. Hence arose the saying: "It is not far from the Capitoline Hill to the Tarpeian Rock."