



FIRSTCUT

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Perfection obsession?

I recently noticed something in my daughter's behavior that concerns me. Before we leave a room, she likes to put certain toys away. And she's very particular. The bear must be seated to the right of the elephant and the doll must have her shoes on. And all of the toy drawers must be closed — all the way. Not even open a crack. And if there is mud on her hands, she washes them immediately. She's not a fan of dirty fingers.

You might say this sounds like a parent's dream — an organized, orderly child. But I'm concerned at 2½ years old she worries about trying to be perfect too much too soon. Life doesn't always work out to perfection's standards, and I'd hate for her to get in the habit of setting unrealistic goals for herself.

I think some business owners do the same thing. Today, it is drilled into our brains that every little thing must be absolutely perfect or it's considered a failure.

But when we do that we ignore the actual merits of a task, day or project and put a magnifying glass on the one thing that went wrong. It makes employees anxious and uncertain — it crushes their confidence in their work. This lack of self-assurance is apparent to customers who become wary to trust you. And all of this means you, the owner, become miserable.

We are a performance-obsessed society, and with growing technology there is even more room for highlighting each error — and blogging about it, and tweeting about it and having accompanying video and photos as exhibits A and B. As mere humans, we can't sustain this unwavering and intense microscope.

As marketing guru Seth Godin recently pointed out in his blog (sethgodin.typepad.com), this also causes bad prioritization decisions. For instance, “the

owner of a bar says to the manager, “How was the night?” and the response is, “The cash register came up \$8 short.” Suddenly there's an urgent problem to be solved. How to replace the \$8 and who to fire?”

But if the question instead had been, “What's up?” — literally, “up,” Godin says, “the answer might have been, “There's a big party at table 12, a going away party that's been buying champagne all night, and Mary set a new record for tips.”

As you set priorities for yourself remember to look at the whole picture.

You get the point. “Highlighting what's working helps you make that happen more often,” Godin insists. “Perfect is overrated. Perfect doesn't scale, either.”

While he doesn't encourage ignoring bad news or permitting employee theft, focusing on the successes — in this case, the going away party that surely covered the missing \$8 — might make up for the failures every time.

So as you put out daily fires and set priorities for yourself and your business, take Godin's advice and remember to look at the whole picture.

Time to go finger paint with my daughter. And to encourage her that a little extra paint on our fingers, clothes, table and nose is part of the fun.

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