

Lessons About Life, Enterprise, from Baking Christmas Cookies

Peters on Excellence

A couple of hours in a hot kitchen can teach you as much about business and management as the latest books on re-engineering or total quality management. That's my take, anyway, after a bout of Christmas-cookie baking. Here are 11 lessons for life (and enterprise), fresh from the oven:

1. Engagement. Watching others helps, but you've gotta get your hands dirty. I hadn't made cookies for years, so I observed a friend do a few batches. I thought I was learning something, and I suppose I was—but nothing really clicked until my hands were covered with flour.

Lesson (for trainers especially): Cut the lectures. Get folks involved in “real stuff” very quickly!

2. A plan. I'm not keen on planning in general, but a time-tested recipe is a godsend. First, it's roughly “right.” More important, it gives you the confidence to get started.

Lesson: Any plan is a help; it gives folks the sense they aren't aimlessly flailing.

3. Art. The plan is an outline—not Holy Writ. Plans, including recipes, are made to be tinkered with—and eventually torn up. Cookie making, software design, and real-estate lending are art. And it's the artists, not the slavish followers of others' recipes, who land in the world's halls of fame.

Lesson: Blind devotion to any plan is downright dumb!

4. Trial and errors. Yes, I'd watched a master at work (or at least a pretty good cook), but in my first hour of hands-on work, with instructions close at hand, I made dozens of mistakes, large and small. And in business life, real life, and cookie-making life, error is the fuel that drives you.

Lesson: Don't “tolerate” mistakes. Embrace them!

5. The same mistakes. “Mistakes are OK,” some concede, “but don't make the same mistake twice.”

Rubbish! I made virtually the same errors, in something as relatively simple as cookie making, over and over ... and over.

Lesson: Nobody ever did anything (interesting) right the first, or 51st, time.

6. A sense of humor. I was awkward at the start. (And at the finish.) I turned the kitchen into a disaster area. Kids and adults made their day laughing at me (or so it seemed). Experimentation—the nub of life and business—depends on learning to laugh at yourself.

Lesson: Learning is precisely about making a fool of yourself—often in public.

7. Perseverance. An ability to laugh at yourself and suppress your ego is key—but so is steely-eyed determination. Sure it was “just” cookie making. But I did want to do it right.

Lesson: Winners want to do everything well, no matter how trivial; and that takes focus and unrelenting drive.

8. Perfectionism. Certainly, the kitchen was a mess. Yes, I was the object of ridicule. But to master one’s craft requires nothing less than pain-in-the-butt perfectionism. Most see artists, and creative types in general, as scatterbrained. I’m sure there are scatterbrained artists (and bakers), but their work doesn’t end up in museums (or cookbooks).

Lesson: Creativity and perfectionism are essential handmaidens.

9. Ownership. It was made clear to me: I was responsible for the Christmas Eve dinner cookies. There were no backups available—and a long ginger-cookie tradition hung on my frail (i.e., incompetent) shoulders. The monkey was ensconced squarely on my back. So I did the job.

Lesson A: No ownership, no passion.

Lesson B: No passion, no perseverance.

Lesson C: There is no half ownership.

10. Accountability. When I’d helped with some previous cookie making (the day before), I’d screwed up the baking time twice. Now I was on my own. That should have made things more difficult. But, to the contrary, I was so attuned to the task that I didn’t come close to blowing it.

Lesson: Until you’re engaged in all aspects of a job, you don’t fully engage.

11. Taste. OK, I’ll brag: I made good cookies. Greatness takes practice—and exquisite taste. I may or may not practice more, but I doubt I’ll ever become to baking what Tom Clancy is to techno-thrillers.

Lesson: If we want great products, we need to find, attract, and retain great creators. Period.