

Little

1. It's All About the Restrooms!

I usually fly to my next seminar in the Great City of Wherever from Logan Airport. The trip from Tinmouth, Vermont, to Boston passes through Gill, Massachusetts. It's exactly halfway, the 87-mile mark on my odometer—hence, the perfect place for a pit stop. With choices aplenty, I am nonetheless firm in my habit of stopping at the Wagon Wheel Country Drive-in. It's, in fact, a smallish coffee shop-diner. The food, including the fresh muffins that are about a foot away as you enter (typically at dawn's early light, in my case), is boffo. The attitude is boffo, too. But make no mistake, my custom is well and truly earned, three or four times a month by . . .

the restroom!

It's clean-to-sparkling. (Come to think of it, despite the invariably crowded shop, I have never seen even the tiniest scrap of paper on the bathroom floor.) Fresh flowers are the norm. And best of all, there is a great multigenerational collection of family pictures that cover all the walls; rushed though I typically am, I invariably spend an extra minute examining one or another, smiling at a group photo from a local company dinner, or some such, circa 1930 I'd guess.

To me, a clean and attractive and even imaginative loo is the best . . .

“We care”

sign in a retail shop or professional office—and (ATTENTION! ATTENTION! ATTENTION!) it goes double when it comes to *employee* restrooms!

So . . .

Step #1: Mind the restrooms!

► NOT A “TRIVIAL PURSUIT”

Today (fall 2009 as I drafted this), the recession’s tentacles continue to cling. If possible, an abiding obsession with “the basics” beat “brilliance” more handily than ever, and I can’t think of a better place to start than in the loo.

(Or a better person to put in the crosshairs than the owner or manager! Reverting to my Navy days: Owner! Owner! Man your swab!)

To do, more generally: I suggest that you devote most of your “morning meeting” or “weekly phone call” (or whatever) to the “little” things—from clean restrooms to deliveries made or missed to thank-you calls to a customer for her business after an order ships to flowers acknowledging “lower-level” staff excellence.

Keep on each other! How about a designated nag:

“Little Things” Lunatic.

Or: **“Tiny Touch” Maniac-in-Chief.**

(Micro-Maestro.)

(Wizard of Wee.)

(Whatever.)

And be very very **very** liberal with the public kudos for those who go an extra *millimeter* to do a “trivial” job especially well.

2. “Small Stuff” Matters. A Lot!

Fix your voice message now!

“If you claim to be different from your competition, a GREAT place to start is your recorded message.”

—Jeffrey Gitomer, *The Little Red Book of Selling*

What other little things might you do today to make a **big difference** in your business?

Action item: *At . . . **every** . . . weekly team meeting, have each and . . . **every** . . . honored invitee (that is, employee upon whom Excellence wholly depends) bring in and present “a little thing” that could become a Big Thing.*

**Select at least one.
Implement.
Now.***

(*This item is very, very short—and I hope very, very sweet. And I know very, very doable. Hence . . . **zero** . . . excuses for not putting it into effect. Now.)

3. Flower Power!

(1) Put flowers all over the place (!) in the office—especially in winter and especially in places like Boston or Minneapolis or Fargo or New York or London or Bucharest. Or Vermont (!).

(2) **Let it be known that the “flower budget” is unlimited.**

(3) In the next **24 hours**, send flowers to . . . **four people** . . . who have supported you inside or outside your organization—including, and this is mandatory, at least one person in another function.*

*I am simply, unabashedly insane about enhancing cross-functional communication, arguably business’s issue #1, via the “soft arts,” such as sending flowers, not just, or mainly, via sexy software!! (Be prepared for me to be repetitive on this topic, coming at it from any angle I can conjure up.)

4. Master the Fine Art of . . . Nudgery!

My mostly dormant but longtime interest in “little things” with enormous impact was rekindled after the recent publication of *Nudge* (Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein), *Sway* (Ori Brafman and Rom Brafman), and a couple of other like books. I had studied their principal antecedent, the work of Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman and his partner Amos Tversky, in the mid-1970s. They unearthed dimension after measurable dimension of human “irrationality” in a world where the myth of rationality and the likes of hyperrational “economic man” held center stage—and damn near every other part of the stage as well. Kahneman and Tversky again and again observed dramatic human overreaction to some tiny thing—and underreaction to some big thing. It was especially eye-opening to an engineer—me.

The central idea of the books just enumerated—and this book—is powerfully simple (as well as simply powerful): “Little” things can

make enormous—**staggering**—BIG differences in situations of the utmost importance; situations that can, in health care, for example, save thousands and thousands of lives. Consider this tiny sampling of examples that I've collected from hither and thither in my wanderings:

- Put geologists (rock guys) and geophysicists (computer guys), typically at war over dramatically different views of the world, in the same room, and . . . **find more oil** . . . than your “separate room” competitors.
- Stanford University works to increase significantly the number of multidisciplinary research grants that it receives. That's the basis for solving the world's most important problems, the president contends. In fact, he calls it nothing less than the linchpin of that Great University's future. One (**big**) part of the answer to this big issue is a “mere” building, a research building wholly and exclusively dedicated to multidisciplinary research—put the whole, diverse team cheek by jowl and watch the miracles of collaboration pour forth!
- People whose offices are more than 100 feet apart might as well be 100 miles apart, in terms of frequency of direct communication.
- Walmart increases shopping cart size—and sales of big items (like microwave ovens) go up . . . **50 percent!**
- Use a round table instead of a square table—and the percentage of people contributing to a conversation leaps up!
- If the serving plate is more than **6.5 feet** from the dining room table, the number of “seconds” goes down **63 percent**, compared with leaving the serving plates on the table.
- Want to make a program “strategic”? Put it at the top of *every* agenda. Make asking about “it” your *first* question in *every* conversation. Put the person in charge in an office next to the Big Boss. Etc. (Talk about powerful messages!)

- Want to save lives? Issue everyone who checks into the hospital **compression stockings** to reduce the risk of deep vein thrombosis. Doing so could save **10,000 lives** in the United Kingdom alone.
- Want to save lives? One survivor of 9/11 had walked downstairs from a top floor—about once a month. Such “trivial” “drills” could have saved innumerable lives.
- Frito-Lay adds new bag sizes, suffers no cannibalization of current offerings, and ends up creating totally new (and enormous) markets—racking up, eventually, billions in revenues.
- Get rid of wastebaskets under desks—recycling leaps up.
- Simply put hand-sanitizer dispensers all over a dorm, with no signs asking students to use them—and the number of sick days and missed classes per student falls **20 percent**. (University of Colorado/Boulder.)
- Let patients see greenery through their windows—and their average post-op stay duration drops 20 percent.
- Go *white* (that is, paint roofs, roads, etc., white)—and reduce CO₂ emissions by 44 billion tons.
- **“Broken windows”**: Clean up trash, fix broken windows, stop miscreants for trivial offenses such as loitering or having open alcohol containers—and increase neighborhood safety dramatically. (Using this approach, Chief Bratton and Mayor Giuliani had spectacular success on a pretty big stage—New York City.)
- If signing up to join a 401(k)-style tax-enhanced savings plan is the *default option* in a computer-based sign-up process . . . **86** percent of people will “join.” If they must “opt *in*” . . . just **45** percent choose to join. (This is a staggering, almost two-to-one difference—in a *decision of enormous personal significance*—and it’s based on a “trivial” difference in the design of the process.)

The preceding examples are merely indicative of the sorts of things (of which there are, more or less, a gazillion) that one can concentrate

on. **The toughest part of this message is that to do much with the idea you need an “attitude.”** An attitude that this sort of thing *can* work, and a willingness to screw around and screw around and then screw around until you get “it” (whatever is under consideration) more or less “right”—and then keep fine-tuning, eternally.

➤ LET ME NUDGE YOU . . . TO BE A NUDGE

Make Nudgery the centerpiece of your change strategy in almost all, if not all, circumstances. (The world may become your oyster—even if you are a junior oysterman.)

Here’s the good news about the Art of Nudgery:

- (1) Amenable to rapid experimentation/failure.
- (2) Quick to implement/Quick to roll out.
- (3) Inexpensive to implement/Inexpensive to roll out.
- (4) Huge multiplier.
- (5) An “Attitude” required—not a one-off “program.”

(6) Does **not**, by and large, require a “power position” from which to launch experiments—this is mostly “invisible stuff,” below the radar, that most people don’t care about on the front end.

Consider:

Study* the Art of Nudgery!

Practice* Nudgery!

Become a **Professional*** Nudgist!

(*As always, “even with” these so-called small things, the words “*study*,” “*practice*,” and “*professional*” are key, the sine qua non, without which there is . . . nothing. Thus, this not so little idea—nudgery—becomes no less than a true “calling.”)