

Which Is More Important – The Details or Big Picture?

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There is a significant difference between people that is obvious when you look for it, but not so obvious when you don't. It shows up in conversation, but often doesn't produce conflict until people start working or living together. The difference is people's preference for detail. Some people love detail. They pour themselves into the minutia of life. They describe things with great specificity. When at work, they create data, detailed reports, and comprehensive plans. They send long emails with lots of background information. When at home they give attention to the subtlest of details, whether decorating, cooking, cleaning, or entertaining.

Others prefer the big picture. They think more in concepts and patterns than in specifics. They prefer future possibilities more than replicating how something was done in the past. They prefer talking about ideas more than how to implement them. They send five-line emails instead of five-page ones. They make business and investment decisions based on instinct rather than thorough research and analysis.

Which is better? Being detail or big-picture oriented? Do you think more companies fail due to bad strategy or bad execution? Do more poor decisions occur because of an over reliance on data or instinct? The answer of course is "it depends". There are many examples of both. Either inattention to detail or the big picture creates problems.

As most everyone experiences, if you don't give attention to the details of your finances, you will pay late fees and if you do it frequently enough you will lose your credit worthiness. If you don't take care of the details of your home or car you will spend more time and money fixing problems later than you would have if you had paid attention earlier.

On the other hand, if all you think about is what needs to get done today or this week's activities, you may be doing work that lost relevance months or years ago. You may get all your bills paid but paying for things you should have sold instead of maintained. You may be so focused at working in your business that you don't spend time working on your business.

Organizations, families, and communities that thrive give attention to the details as well as the big picture. They have a balanced focus on tactical execution as well as strategic thinking. They take care of the day's details as well as give attention to longer-term matters.

Yet as obvious as this need is for a balanced perspective, many people don't have it. They ignore one or the other. There are parents, children, co-workers, bosses, and friends who focus on the details, or the big picture, to the exclusion of the other. There are bosses who micromanage everything their employees do and completely lose sight of the "why". There are also bosses who barely know anything about what their people do while spending their energy dreaming up the next big idea. There are friends who want to help conceive the overall theme of your party but have nothing to do with helping you fill out all the invitations. There are students who love to learn but hate doing their homework.

If you or people you influence lack a balanced perspective, consider these principles:

- Helpful principles to balance overly big-picture thinkers:
 - When talking about strategies, ideas, and what's possible, give equal time to how you will implement them. Ideas are worthless without execution. Knowing what to do isn't equal to doing it. If an idea is worth investing in so is the time, money, people, and resources to implement it. Move from thinking to doing by moving your attention to resources, milestones, tasks, owners, and due dates.



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- When confronting problems, consider not only the obvious major fixes, but also more precise ones. Not every problem deserves a fork lift or wrecking ball. Not every problem requires buying something or firing someone. Just because people, products, processes, and systems don't perform well doesn't mean they need to be replaced. Some just need a targeted adjustment.
- When in discussions or meetings, offer to help with the real work, not just contribute to the discussion. Advice and wisdom are insufficient when it comes time to getting things done. Volunteer to do some of the implementation work too. Defy the Pareto principle that 20 percent of the people do 80 percent of the work. Pitch in where the real work gets done.
- Helpful principles to balance overly detail-oriented people:
 - When things aren't going well, challenge the status quo. Stop doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. That is the definition of insanity as popularly attributed to Albert Einstein. Consider not just what to do and how to do it, but why. Give attention to the purpose. Assess the real value of what is being done and achieved.
 - Be open to new experiences and ideas. Be very slow to defend what you know and do if it is because "we've always done it this way." Adopt the mindset that there is always a better way. Brainstorm new approaches and allow imaginations to flow. Defer judgement until after people have a chance to express their creativity. Then apply judgement, but with an open mind.
 - When making decisions, consider the tangible as well as the intangible. Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it doesn't exist or isn't important. That which is unseen is often the biggest asset or liability. Unseen attributes like passion, motivation, character, attitude, knowledge, and loyalty are critical to success. They drive people's behaviors which drive tangible results.
- A helpful principle for both:
 - When making decisions, be aware of biases that are inherent when over relying on either instinct or data. Find balance. Most any decision based on experience can be improved with research, valid data, and other's input. So too can most any data or financial analysis be improved by applying common sense. The best decisions utilize both experience and research.

Article written by Mike Hawkins, award-winning author of *Activating Your Ambition: A Guide to Coaching the Best Out of Yourself and Others* (www.ActivatingYourAmbition.com), author of the *SCOPE of Leadership* six-book series on coaching leaders to lead as coaches (www.ScopeOfLeadership.com), and president of Alpine Link Corp (www.AlpineLink.com), a boutique consulting firm specializing in leadership development and sales performance improvement.

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