

“Don’t sweat the small stuff!” You remember hearing that, right? May be you even say it. “Don’t sweat the small stuff!” Now, that’s a classic piece of advice that’s been given billions of times.

On the one hand, that saying is often wrong! But on the other hand, it’s not *always* wrong! So, which of those “hands” are you on? How do we know when and when not to “sweat the small stuff?” It’s vital for your organization that your leaders know just which one is the path to follow. So, let’s unpack all of that.

Of course, the simple point of this phrase—the straightforward meaning—is that we should stop focusing on the unimportant tasks and pay attention to the things that matter. Well, *of course* that’s good advice.

But just what “the small stuff” is has changed in several different directions for radically different reasons, from recent developments in key areas like technology...to culture change...to unprecedented big-government policing of workplace relations. These different leverage points have worked to completely redefine the meaning and the leverage of what used to be considered “small stuff.”

So, what does all that really mean? It means that we should always “sweat the *right* stuff!” And perhaps the best way to grapple with this is to provide a few specific topics and examples. And right alongside each of the specific examples is a quick lesson blurb for how to best “sweat the right stuff”—and in doing so, possibly prevent major fiascos and help pave the way to greatness.

All this can and does happen throughout the life cycle of your organization. So, as we proceed, we’ll start at the origins of an organization and move towards more mature phases.

- Let’s start with *picking your people*. First, we should *gladly* acknowledge that every person matters in our organization, every person is important. If not, why are we paying them? So that requires paying close attention to every person added. You know, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve watched organizational teams implode. And there are many causes for that, from personality incompatibilities...to misgauging the skill sets of people that were promised and expected...to people’s lack of willingness to contribute anywhere near solid expectations, to name just a few.

Here’s the truth: properly selecting the members of a team is the headwaters of everything that follows. If you have two partners in your business, for example, each must carry his or her weight. If you have five team members and just one is unfruitful, you are operating at 80% capacity in relation to the need. That’s 4 out of 5, and that 80% can drop even lower due to having to divert valuable management time to the dysfunction itself. And your most key successful competitors are likely operating at 100%. Here’s the lesson: *sweat the process of selecting every person well!*

- Here’s the second item: *optimizing your Board*. Are you part of a Board of Directors for a business or a Board of Trustees for a nonprofit? Frankly, many boards are very problematic. For example, some are quite dysfunctional, mildly deferring to a grindingly incompetent CEO and waiting to act months or even years after the CEO’s incompetence is obvious. Or perhaps the Board is riding herd too closely on a highly competent CEO. Other Boards are superfluous—that means that Board members are not adding anything that’s needed and actually causing time and effort to be expended unnecessarily. And still other Boards are simply ineffective, merely there to comply with the required laws. The fact remains—Boards are too important to be average. The lesson? *Sweat every detail needed to make the Board of your organization efficient and effective!*
- Third, there’s *the design of your product or service*. Apple’s extraordinary CEO Steve Jobs was criticized for years for being so immersed in every detail of Apple’s products. Yet those products have had what’s we can call a very long “tail”—his attention to every detail forged Apple to sustain incredible growth in the fast-changing tech world for years and to become the most valuable

company on earth for a time. But, sadly, many executives don't really know what truly comprises the heart of their product or service. This is evidenced when, say, a top executive cuts a key budget without a truly full understanding of sustaining key elements of the product or service. And, just how does the product or service need to morph in order to lead the market? So, would you say your enterprise's executives are cutting-edge when it comes to leading your industry in products or services? The lesson: *great leaders sweat the small stuff regarding their products or services.*

- Fourth, *"software is eating the world."* Now that is a justly famous quote from Marc Andreessen, the preeminent venture-capitalist who, as a young man in the early 1990s, actually invented the first graphical web browser that is essential to your laptop today. That's right—have you used Chrome, Firefox, or Safari lately? I have, too, and we can credit Andreessen for kicking it off!

And his idea about software eating the world is proven daily by the likes of some of the most valuable companies in the world: Google, Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft. Whew, you say, at least my company isn't in the software business—nothing to worry about there! But that's not true! Countless companies going out of business such as major newspapers and Sears are the actual evidence that software *is* eating the world. That's an operative truth that was not even remotely on the brain of the typical retailer or newspaper. You see, omnivorous software has an extensive reach, for better or for worse. The lesson is this: *sweat the piece of new software that people living far away from you are coding.*

- Fifth, *what's the data you are not gathering or simply ignoring...*you know, the data you are not even asking for right now in your organization. You see, that's the data that your competitors are using to blow your organization away. Yes, here's the lesson: if you are or want to be a surviving and thriving competitor in your industry, then *sweat acquiring the data that really do matter.*
- Sixth, *using email very judiciously.* How about that explode-in-everybody's-face email? Now that's a classic! An email that is sent in too much haste or in anger can significantly alter relationships, both business and personal. Of course, there are only a couple of billion people that the email can be forwarded to in, oh, about two seconds. The lesson: *sweat each and every email and the very expensive implications of the email recipient easily forwarding it or simply storing it for later.*
- Seventh, *your assumptions about pretty much every dimension of organizational dynamics.* From technology to culture to business models to competition, some of your key assumptions about how organizations work may be just about as relevant as week-old bread. The lesson? *Sweat whether every one of your key assumptions is still valid today and will be valid next year.*

So here's a summary of "sweating the right stuff." Every person on your team. Your Board structure, culture, and effectiveness. Your core products or services. Emerging software development outside your organization. The data you're not asking for. Using email judiciously. And, finally, all of your assumptions.

The extraordinary CEO Andy Grove who built Intel Corporation into a true powerhouse decades ago wrote a book titled *Only the Paranoid Survive*. Well, maybe so, maybe not.

But one thing is for sure. What smug, self-satisfied executives could afford to ignore decades ago is no longer ignorable by the executive now stewarding his or her organization. Success may mean that one doesn't have to sweat *all* the small stuff.

But success does mean we have to sweat the *right* stuff—and those priorities include facets that weren't even on the radar just a few years ago. So, go right ahead and succeed by *sweating the right stuff!*

## *A&A: Application & Action*

1. Name the top three of these seven organizational realities that struck you as most relevant and perhaps even urgent to you and/or your organization. Ponder and then discuss specifics of how you will effectively address each of the three.
  
2. Name the one of these seven topics that seems most irrelevant to your church or your enterprise. Good for you! Now build your case for that irrelevancy and low risk of that typical reality to the people you work with.
  
3. What is the process you have in place as a leader to “sweat the right stuff?” Be specific—go through each of the seven topics relevant to you and highlight what you are doing to “sweat it out.”