

SuperFreakconomics

The absurdly talented George Bernard Shaw—a world-class writer and a founder of the London School of Economics— noted this thought deficit many years ago. “Few people think more than two or three times a year,” Shaw reportedly said. “I have made an international reputation for myself by thinking once or twice a week.”

“Prediction,” as Niels Bohr liked to say, “is very difficult, especially if it’s about the future.”

The key to learning is feedback. It is nearly impossible to learn anything without it.

As Albert Einstein liked to say, everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.

Why do so many frown so sternly at the idea of having fun? Perhaps out of fear that it connotes you aren’t serious. But best as we can tell, there is no correlation between appearing to be serious and actually being good at what you do. In fact an argument can be made that the opposite is true. There has been a recent surge in research into “expert performance,” hoping to determine what makes people good at what they do. The single-most compelling finding? Raw talent is overrated: people who achieve excellence—whether at golf or surgery or piano-playing—were often not the most talented at a young age, but became expert by endlessly practicing their skills. Is it possible to endlessly practice something you don’t enjoy? Perhaps, although neither one of us is capable of it.

Why is it so important to have fun? Because if you love your work (or your activism or your family time), then you'll want to do more of it. You'll think about it before you go to sleep and as soon as you wake up; your mind is always in gear. When you're that engaged, you'll run circles around other people even if they are more naturally talented.

Have fun, think small, don't fear the obvious—these are all childlike behaviors that, according to us at least, an adult would do well to hang on to. But how strong is the evidence that this stuff actually works?

Understanding the incentives of all the players in a given scenario is a fundamental step in solving any problem.

Don't listen to what people say; watch what they do.)

Look around the world and you'll find overwhelming evidence of the herd mentality at work. It influences virtually every aspect of our behavior—what we buy, where we eat, how we vote.

It's very human but it's a wrong-headed strategy, because the subtext message is that a lot of people just like you are doing this. It legitimizes the undesirable behavior.”

But if there is one thing we've learned from a lifetime of designing and analyzing incentives, the best way to get what you want is to treat other people with decency.

Figure out what people really care about, not what they say they care about. 2. Incentivize them on the dimensions that are valuable to them but cheap for you to provide. 3. Pay attention to how people respond; if their response surprises or frustrates you, learn from it and try something different. 4. Whenever possible, create incentives that switch the frame from adversarial to cooperative. 5. Never, ever think that people will do something just because it is the “right” thing to do. 6. Know that some people will do everything they can to game the system, finding ways to win that you never could have imagined. If only to keep yourself sane, try to applaud their ingenuity rather than curse their greed.

The key is failing fast and failing cheap. That’s a mantra that comes out of Silicon Valley. I prefer the statement ‘failing well,’ or ‘failing smart.’

In this context, Deane says, failure “has to be recognized as a victory.”

When failure is demonized, people will try to avoid it at all costs—even when it represents nothing more than a temporary setback.

A premortem tries to find out what might go wrong before it’s too late. You gather up everyone connected with a project and have them imagine that it launched and failed miserably. Now they each write down the exact reasons for its failure.