

Work, Details, Your Surroundings and Your Mind

By *Harrison Barnes*

Yesterday, I was getting a haircut. Before I got the cut, the woman in the salon was washing my hair. As is typical in most salons, the woman also gave me a scalp massage for a minute or two while washing my hair. I was enjoying the scalp massage and told her so:

"You guys ought to start offering these scalp massages for an hour in addition to cutting hair. This is great!" I told her.

"It is obvious you are feeling my cosmic aura and energy," she said. "You can tell that I am an energy healer."

"You're an energy healer?" I asked.

"Yes, I am also a Reiki healer and have a gift."

"Really, what is going on with my energy?" I asked.

"You have too many small things to get done. You need to concentrate on getting small things done. When you get the small things done, everything will come into focus."

I asked her a few more questions about this then she offered to come over to my house for \$100 for 40 minutes and do some work on my [energy field](#). Her advice about getting small things done is something that really stuck with me. The reason for this is because small tasks and little things are something that can build up and ultimately hold many of us back. Small things can become so numerous that they are often crushing. In fact, many of us allow numerous small things to build up and these small things can obscure our view of the larger and more important tasks we need to accomplish. The ability to manage small tasks is a skill, and it's a skill that is really essential to your success in your career. Getting small things done is about not letting things "slip through the cracks," and being able to control what's going on in our environment. The ability to control and master small tasks is about being able to control and master work and often life itself.

The best lawyers, for example, are the ones who have mastered the smallest details and the intricacies of whatever they are doing. Mastery in any job typically comes after having done it for thousands of hours. The longer someone does a given task, the more likely they are to master small details. The more they master the details, the better they become in the overall job and work they do. With a tennis player, for example, the more they play the game, the better they may get at their second serve or their top spin. The piano player may learn to master a certain chord. Everyone masters details the longer they do something, and we respect people who are able to master details.

One of the things I've noticed throughout the years is that the market respects people who have the ability to master small tasks. Everything out there is in the details. For example, the best made cars are typically those that master the small details the best. These cars have smaller tolerances between various parts and everything fits tighter together. The cars function better over time because they are put together with greater tolerance in their small details. If we are purchasing an expensive handbag, the odds are always very good that this handbag will be expensive due to not only the material, but also due to the attention to detail paid to the stitching. We appreciate when people are able to master small details, and the market pays well for this. The mastery of small details shows we're in control of our work. When details are done more effectively, the market also pays more for the work that we do. Employers seek out people who have mastered details. Consumers seek out people who have mastered details. We need to get good at mastering details.

We all have numerous small things we need to get done. In fact, getting small things done is often something that haunts our every moment. For many people, a massive amount of small things build up to such a degree that they are never able to see the big picture and everything that's going on around them. One of the most incredible things I see wherever I go in the world and wherever I meet people, is that most people are putting off doing countless little things that constantly get stretched out year after year.

- Organizing a sock drawer
- Cleaning out the garage
- Organizing under the bathroom sink
- Purchasing new dishes
- Cleaning out the glove box

The inability to keep small details organized in your life is often a reflection of your ability to master the details of your work. If you cannot master the details in your own life or surroundings, it often reflects to your employer and those around you that you will never be able to master the work you do.

Several years ago, I was speaking with a management expert and he told me he can tell a lot about what sort of employee someone is going to be by how clean they keep their office. We have all seen offices in various states of disrepair, and I wonder if there is some truth to this statement. Incredibly, this management expert would hold back certain employees from promotions and other advancements based on how they kept their office. He didn't go into a lot of detail about this; however, I instinctively got a real sense about what he was talking about. There is something to this.

I've noticed throughout the years that the people who tend to be the most organized also tend to be the same people who turn work in on time. Everything about our work is really in the details. We give people a good understanding of how good we are likely to be at something based on how many details we've mastered. The more we master the details of our work, the more it appears as if we have mastered the work itself.

When I call various executives on the phone, I'm always able to tell a lot about them based on the content of their voicemail. For example, do you know people whose voicemails are like this:

"Hello. Today is January 19 and I will be in the office all day. If I did not pick up the phone I am likely on the phone with a client or..."

or like this:

"Hello. This is John. Please leave a message!"

The person whose voicemail contains a date and so forth sends the message that they are really on the ball and ready for business. You sense they have a routine they follow every single day, and you also sense they are on top of whatever they do. This person sends off an air of professionalism and attention to detail that most others simply do not. For what it's worth, people who are that on the ball with their voicemail messages are most often the best employees and do well with almost every employer they work with, from what I've seen.

It's all in the details.

I work in a library of sorts, and am surrounded by thousands of books I've purchased throughout the years. New books arrive in my office on almost a daily basis. I have notes on my desk and stacks of books in various corners around me that I am waiting to review. I am hardly someone who looks all that organized, but there is actually a method to my madness. I keep one notebook on my desk, and one only, and I take notes all week long. At the end of each week I make lists and deadlines from these lists and reorganize the books in my office and put them back in one place. If I didn't do this, I am not sure anything would get done. One of the most important things for me, personally, is being incredibly well organized. I never let any task I am working on slip through the cracks.

Several years ago, someone I was working with called my mind "like a vice grip" and seemed to admire me for this. I didn't start out this way, and used to be horrible with details, but learned very quickly once I became an attorney how important the details really are. The story I'm about to tell you makes me smile when I think about it, but it's actually not really that funny. My first job out of [law school](#) was working for a federal judge and as a part of this, we were responsible for denying hoards of petitions by various prisoners in the federal system to get out of jail early or have their convictions overturned. One day, about three weeks into this first job of mine, the judge I was working for called me into his office and closed the door. He seemed visibly upset and I couldn't figure out what was wrong. I got a strange "vibe" from him I will never forget that seemed to be a combination of extreme fear and anger.

"Do you realize that you made a typo on this order and almost let a bank robber out of prison?" he said.

I looked at the order. I'd gone through probably 20 petitions of prisoners that morning and denied all of them. For some reason, however, I had done a "search and replace" in an order I'd worked on and replaced the word DENIED with the word GRANTED. The judge had even signed the order and, only after reviewing all of the orders he signed, did he realize the mistake I'd made. The judge knew how to look at details and was extremely good at it. In fact, he was a superstar, and to this day, I respect him more and more each day for his incredible ability to control details. Despite having the most cases of any judge in his district when I worked with him, he had the shortest docket (cases pending). He had time for work, rest, and relaxation. He didn't have to take work home with him every night. He knew how to control the details better than anyone else I've ever known. Controlling the details has huge rewards.

I never made a mistake like that again. Incredibly, I'd almost ended up letting a bank robber out of jail by not learning to control the details.

Keeping your office and surroundings neat and organized is a sign of detail mastery. There is a certain level of discipline that's required to keep things neat, clean, and organized. If someone doesn't have this level of discipline on their desk, in their office, in their home and even in their car, then people around them wonder if they can also organize other aspects of their careers and lives. A career requires discipline and a life requires discipline as well. Getting your surroundings organized is a metaphor, in my opinion, for getting your mind organized.

For several years, the desk in my office was on the second floor of a building and faced a window right above a traffic light. The street that my office overlooked was not that busy but was perpendicular to a street that was extremely busy. Thus, most of the time the stoplight in front of my office was red and there were generally people sitting in their cars waiting for the light to turn green. I would estimate that 90% of the time I looked up, I could see people stopped at the stoplight. I could look down at people directly in their cars. A disturbing fact I am going to just get out of the way is that a lot of people pick their noses when they are sitting at stop lights. For years, I looked down and out my window and saw various people picking their noses. Without going into detail, I would estimate approximately 20% of the people I witnessed on a day-to-day basis did something inappropriate with the products of their excavation.

However, one of the more interesting patterns I started to notice after some time was how people's cars looked on the inside. Some people have very clean cars that look well organized inside and others have cars that look very unorganized and are dirty. People keep their cars in an extraordinarily different level of cleanliness on the inside. Some people have a collection of fast food bags and so forth that probably have stuff growing in them together with years of newspapers. It's incredible to me the level of disrepair that different people keep their cars in.

One day, I looked outside and I noticed one of our contract temporary employees had been pulled over by the police right beneath my window, and they were searching her car. This woman had been brought in from a temporary employment agency to help us answer phones during a very busy time. This woman was incredibly clean cut, very beautiful, very well spoken, and appeared quite polished in all respects. However, as they pulled stuff out of her car I realized there must be something terribly wrong.

- There were dirty blankets and towels
- Multiple hairbrushes
- Several gym sized duffel bags that appeared to be full of old clothes
- Rotten fruit
- You could see several empty packs of cigarettes
- A half full bag of cat litter

I had no idea why the police were searching her car, or what she had done. What concerned me was her car. From a psychological perspective, it seemed to me that what was going on in her car could only be a reflection of what was going on inside of her mind. The mess inside of her car was shocking for its magnitude and was such that it probably would have taken her at least a year to allow the car to get to that point. I filed this away in my memory and told myself mentally that the

woman did not seem all there.

Over the next week, it became obvious there were several problems with this woman related to her ability to get things done. She was making incredibly inappropriate remarks to others and, although I was not involved in supervising her, the issues with her soon became profound enough that whomever was in charge of supervising her ended up telling the temp agency to send someone else. On her last day of work, she went around the office telling everyone that her supervisor was evil because he was a WASP (White Anglo Saxon Protestant) which was definitely a first in my career. In a word, the woman turned out to be quite crazy.

I've noticed that the most psychologically unstable people typically have the dirtiest and most disorganized bedrooms. The most disorganized offices. The most disorganized surroundings. When I was young, I was living in Spain with a bunch of young people one summer, and there was a girl in the room next to me. One day, the person supervising the dorms walked past her room and saw that it was a complete wreck. There were papers everywhere and the room was in very bad shape. The most interesting thing to me about this was how he reacted. Later that day, he called her into his office and confronted her, saying that he thought she was using drugs due to the condition of her room. As it turned out, he was right. She gave him the drugs and the next day they put her on a plane and sent her home. She ended up getting expelled from the private school she was attending due to this.

The person overseeing the dorms made this connection from nothing more than the condition of her room. He'd noticed it was clean for weeks and then suddenly went to hell. He said something I will never forget: "Our surroundings are a reflection of what is going on in our minds." For many people, doing drugs for your mind is like going into a home and turning over all the furniture. When people's minds are messed up, their surroundings go to hell as well.

When I was growing up, I lived with my mother and she held a job that required her to leave for work every morning at around 7:00 or 7:30 am. She wouldn't come home each evening until around 6:30 or 7:00. When she would get home, she would often spend an hour or two making dinner and then finally call me and my sister down to eat at around 9:00 pm. By the time we all finished eating at around 9:30 or so, my mother would be far too tired to do the dishes and they would be stacked in the kitchen with all sorts of dirty pots and pans. Because my mother tended to cook a lot, the collection of pots and pans would often be quite extensive and the kitchen would be a real mess.

The next day, I would invariably come home from school and see this giant mess. The mess would be so huge that I would often decide to wash these silly dishes, rather than go out to play. Given my mother's hectic work schedule, the entire house would often be messy as well. My room and my sister's room was messy. My mother's room was messy, and various rooms in the house were all messy. If I didn't do the dishes, my mother might do them when she got home, or she might declare that we should all go out to eat. This was pretty common. She would take us all to a Greek diner called the Grecian Table up the street and, once there, we would sit there for an hour or more while she smoked cigarettes and drank coffee while eating and waiting for our dinner. These dinners were so boring and long. Typically, I would go down the street while we waited for our meal to a little pizzeria called Buscemies and play video games.

The plates would be back home piled up when we got there. I disliked all the mess, and it was something I found quite upsetting. What I noticed was that when things were not messy around the house, everything seemed to be much calmer and happier. A clean and organized house, in many respects, means a clean mind. Your office and your surroundings should remain clean because this is often a reflection of your ability to master details. What do we think about the person whose room may be clean but there is dirty clothing, papers, and other stuff hidden beneath their bed? What is our opinion of the person who had a clean house but whose closets are stuffed to the brim with junk? There is something to this, and we all sense it. A messy closet can almost be like a messy area of our mind--it may be hidden from public view, but it is there.

Many people are calmed by the serenity of zen gardens and its simplicity. Steve Jobs, who studied zen, made an entire career out of doing small details well and keeping things uncluttered in his work at Apple.

Around 25 years ago, I saw a fascinating presentation by a handwriting expert. He was able to give in-depth psychological insights to people by only examining their handwriting and, in most cases, only their signature. I didn't know it at the time, but people's entire psychological makeup can often be deduced from just observing nothing but their handwriting. What was so interesting about this was that the handwriting expert provided in-depth psychological profiles of people without ever meeting them. After he had done this, a psychologist was brought out who had spent hours interviewing and testing these subjects and in every single case, the handwriting expert was right on. The idea is that we can tell a lot about people based on what they put out there on the outside. A handwriting sample that shows a lot of detail, for example, is from a person who is typically very detail-oriented. A sample that shows messiness is from a person who is not, and so forth.

However, the most interesting part of all this was the handwriting expert's observation and belief that people could change by changing their writing style. He believed that if people started paying more attention to their writing style, they could become more like the person they wanted to be based on mimicking the writing style of the person they wanted to be like. I found this incredibly interesting at the time. This is almost similar to the change I experienced psychologically when the house I grew up in was clean and organized.

There is a way that I have noticed throughout the years to recognize people who will do well in their jobs. It's in the details, and the details are evident in the way they maintain their work environment, cars, and even homes. The more attention there is to detail in these regards, the more likely the person is to be good at whatever it is they do. If you haven't mastered your mind, it's going to come through in the details. You need to understand people are watching you and how you manage your surroundings as evidence of how you master details. Your surroundings are a reflection of what is going on inside your mind.