

# Less Is More

Less priorities; less people;  
less school; less  
customers; less is more  
both in business and life!

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Over the last few months a convergence of news, reading, and conversations have screamed the mantra “less is more.” It first grabbed me as I was watching an interview of China’s first track and field superstar Liu Xiang, who captured gold in the 110-meter huddles at the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, and set a new world record this past summer.

Unlike most athletes who train incessantly, Liu’s taken a scientific approach and trains just three hours/day. Does anyone doubt that Tiger Wood’s mini-break from golf, while grieving the loss of his father, has contributed to the record-setting play we’ve seen in the last few months? Many athletes experience this same boost in performance after coming back from an injury that has limited their practice. Less practice is more.

Within weeks of Liu’s record setting performance, Denmark was named the happiest place in the world. Noted Adrian White, an analytical social psychologist at the University of Leicester in central England, “smaller countries tend to be a little happier because there is a stronger sense of collectivism.”

Rereading Thomas Friedman’s classic *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, the world would be a lot happier if regional cultures hadn’t been forced to form artificial countries. Let Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon go the way of Yugoslavia, breaking up into more culturally aligned mini-countries. And I don’t think it’s coincidental that 42 of the U.S. states expect to run budget surpluses in 2006 while the Federal Government continues to bleed red. The less people lumped together in nation-states, the more fiscally responsible and happy.

Moving closer to the business world, Seth Godin’s latest must-read book is appropriately entitled *Small is the New Big*, admonishing us to act small if we want to be big. It’s worth taking a couple minutes to go to [www.sethgodin.com](http://www.sethgodin.com) and click on his Squidoo Lens overview of the book which includes a complimentary download of his title essay.

Writes Godin, “Today, little companies often make more money than big companies. Little churches grow faster than worldwide ones. Little jets are way faster (door to door) than big ones.” Given the additional security obstacles to commercial air travel, news this summer that Eclipse Aviation’s very light jet (VLJ) received FAA Certification is going to make Godin’s comment on air travel a reality for more and more of us. Small jets are better than big jets (and less likely to be targets of terrorism).

Brad Anderson, CEO of \$27.4 billion electronics retailer Best Buy, used ideas from a similar marketing-focused book *Angel Customers and Demon Customers* to reduce the number of customer groups on which Best Buy is focusing its efforts. Larry Seldman's and Geoffrey Colvin's book points out that some customers may be highly unprofitable and that not all customers are valuable i.e. less customers is more.

Google has shown a similar wisdom on the employee team side. Recognizing that smaller teams are more effective, Google has organized their engineers into teams of three to drive hundreds of innovations. Simply adding a fourth person to the team would dramatically lessen their impact.

John Carney, CEO of Alexandria, Virginia-based Carney Interactive, has applied this same less-is-more philosophy to individual quarterly priorities. Once required to name five priorities each quarter, Carney's 45 employees are now asked to outline three. Notes Carney, "inevitably either the employees, including myself, padded our lists with slam dunk priorities or found at the end of the quarter that there were two of the five we simply couldn't find time to complete." Less priorities means more focus.

This brings me full circle back to training and education. A few weeks ago I had the pleasure to hear speak small business guru Michael Gerber, author of the huge bestseller *E-Myth Revisited: Why Most Small Businesses Don't Work and What to Do About It*. In his speech, Gerber discussed the topic of mastery and how his saxophone teacher taught him, at the early age of eight, the importance of practicing three hours a day.

No more than a week later I was talking with my ten year old son Cameron about school, who was dreading the start of a new school year. When I asked him how he would redesign school, he suggested it would start around 10am; students would focus on a subject they love for 90 minutes (his is marine biology); recess and lunch would take them to 12:45pm; then another 90 minutes of focused learning with the school day ending at 2:15pm.

His reasoned three hours of focused learning a day seems to align with both Gerber's and Liu's experience about mastery. And Bill Gates' Foundation is supporting the creation of high schools with less students which will also start later in the morning, based on years of research that support both notions. Smaller schools create better academic performance.

Where in your business and personal life would less give you more? Think about it and then act.