

ORGANIZE YOUR SPEECH

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When Disorganization Leads to Efficiency

Mr./Madame Toastmaster, fellow Toastmasters, and esteemed guests:

The other day I Googled “organize and efficiency”, and in 0.42 seconds I had 87 million results at my fingertips. Some of the articles had titles like “21 Tips to Organize Your Office and Get More Done” and “50 Ways to Make Your Home More Organized”. I think most of us would agree that organization, in general, leads to greater efficiency. But today I would like to share three tips about how *disorganization* can actually improve your productivity and make your life better, too. What you are going to hear today is that (one) sometimes messes have to get worse before they can get better, (two) a little *controlled* disorganization helps keep the greater organizational system working more smoothly, and (three) it is important to set a good threshold for organizing clutter when it inevitably shows up. Let us take them one at a time.

The first idea is that things have to get worse before they can get better. Two weekends ago, my wife and I were organizing the cupboard under the bathroom sink to make more storage space and help us find things more easily. Talk about a fun Saturday afternoon activity. Needless to say, the cabinet was a disaster, with toothbrushes heaped in piles with cleaning chemicals, razor blades mixed with shampoo – you get the idea. There was no way we could make sense of it in its current condition. Instead, we took everything out of the cupboard and threw it onto the living room floor. If someone had arrived at our apartment just then, it would have looked like a tornado had hit CVS. Things had definitely gotten worse. But having everything out where we could see it allowed us to begin grouping similar things together and to organize the clutter. Toothbrushes found their friends, the ibuprofen got back together with the acetaminophen, and the Clorox paired off with the Windex. Before we knew it, the mess was transformed into organized piles, relegated to smaller containers, and neatly placed back under the sink. Now we had more space free than before, and we could find what we needed more quickly. This would not have been possible, however, had we not allowed the situation to get worse first.

So disorganization can be a vehicle for increased efficiency if you allow a mess to get worse temporarily. But sometimes, having permanent but controlled messes can improve efficiency too. In fact, I have found that a little disorganization can help perpetuate an organizational structure and allow long-term efficiency gains. Back in my laboratory at Stanford, we used a lot of screws, nuts, and bolts to set up our experiments. There are two ways to organize these components. Method One involves relegating the umpteen types of screws, nuts, and bolts to different containers based on their sizes, shapes, and thread types. This makes it really easy to find a particular type of screw, but what happens when you want to put screws away? I found that people (no names mentioned!) either just left screws in piles around the lab, or threw them into the incorrect bins. In contrast, I championed Method Two, which consisted of two big bins for screws, nuts, and bolts. One

bin was for the most common type of screw we used in the lab, and the other contained everything else. What became of this? Certainly, I had to hunt longer within each bin to find the particular screw that I needed. But, at least now I knew where to look! No more piles of screws lying around the lab – they all ended up in one of these bins because it was so easy to put them away. In the end, I believe Method Two saved time. Thus, a little controlled disorganization can help perpetuate an overarching organizational system and result in greater efficiency.

My third and final point is that it is important to set a proper threshold for cleaning up messes. I will draw this example from my marriage. Like me, my wife Kristen enjoys having a neat and tidy home. However, that might be where our similarities in this area end. You see, everyone has a “mess threshold” at which they decide that the clutter around them is so great that they must clean it up. I have a very low tolerance for mess – if I see papers lying around, clothes not folded and put away, or dishes on the counter, my urge is to deal with them and restore some semblance of order. Kristen, on the other hand, will be the first to admit that she somehow remains unaware of messes that would otherwise drive me crazy. She has a very high mess threshold. Now, over the last five years of being married, what I have learned by observing her is that in some ways it can be more efficient to allow myself a slightly higher mess threshold than what my obsessive personality would ordinarily have afforded. This is because, for instance, putting away ten papers at once is easier than putting away one paper ten times. It actually *saves me work* to let messes accumulate for a while before dealing with them; having a slightly higher mess threshold improves my efficiency. I think Kristen wins.

So in conclusion, I hope you have seen that, in some circumstances, *disorganization* can actually *improve* efficiency. To repeat, it helps to let messes get worse temporarily. It is useful to allow for some controlled, localized disorganization. And it can help to have a little tolerance for messes. I hope that this talk about disorganization will help you reorient the way you think about achieving efficiency.

Mr./Madame Toastmaster.