

Don't Take Yourself Too Seriously

By Tim Reed

If you've spent any amount of time in a leadership role, then you've felt the pressure. You know what's at stake if it goes wrong—customers stop buying, your team members all quit, the company folds. All because of you.

And given this reality, there's an air of severity that hangs over everything.

If you ask the most popular gurus and sages on social media, the answer is to tough it out. GSD. Rise and grind. Take ownership. Hustle. Work hard—play hard.

And, while there's no question that diligence and industry are virtues we should strive for, what often comes from consuming this swill of advice is people who take themselves way too seriously.

Sure, the life of a business leader has consequences—big ones. But you know what? So does the life of every other human being on this planet. Are you really any more special than them?

No one likes to be around people who take themselves too seriously—no one.

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We've all been around blowhards who think their lives are more important than everybody else's. Content to wander around in clouds of their own egotistical flatulence, such people are uncomfortably known the second they walk into a room.

Of course, this is easy to agree on. What's much more difficult is coming to the realization that the blowhard with the smelly self-image is you.

How do I know this? Because left to my own devices, that's exactly who I am.

My natural bent is to take everything too seriously: my work, my play, my family, my hobbies, and (especially) myself.

At the core of this is a fragile ego, one that places the subject at the center of the universe. And, when you place yourself at the center of the universe, you find out very quickly just how exhausting it is to hold everything together by your own strength.

And it's not only exhausting—it's also completely ineffective! Nothing proves ineptitude like believing we're better than we are. If you've ever found yourself in this situation (as I have), the pendulum often swings from rash choices made in haste to doddering druthers made long after the bell has rung. In both cases, time, money, and potential are wasted.

And, while for Frodo, the fate of Middle-Earth may have hung in the balance, it certainly doesn't for us. We should rather think about Gandalf's advice to Frodo's uncle, Bilbo: "You are a very fine person, Mr. Baggins, and I am very fond of you; but you are only quite a little fellow in a wide world after all!"

In light of this, you might determine that you need to start thinking less of yourself—but that's actually the same problem as before, just from a different angle. The key to break-

ing free from taking yourself too seriously isn't to think less of yourself—*it's to think of yourself less.*

I've found that since my disposition is naturally bent towards thinking I'm the most important thing that's ever existed, I need intentional reminders of my place in the universe—and that starts with the "so what?" game.

The "So What?" Game

This is a game that you can play with anyone—your husband, your wife, your friends, or even a stranger at the supermarket. You can play it anytime and anywhere. My favorite person to play this game with is Matt Bradley, a friend I work with.

Here's how the game goes.

Pretend that whatever important thing you're working on fails miserably and ask, "So what?"

From there, think about what you would do next, explore what would happen if that catastrophically failed as well, and, again, ask the question, "So what?"

After playing this for a number of rounds, you'll eventually lose your status, your job, and—if you're the owner—your company as well. But my guess is that the world will still be turning and society will still be functioning just fine.

At the very worst, you'll have to find a new job or



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start a new company. But if that's the worst thing that could happen, I'd say that your life is pretty good.

Now, a true professional of the ego will pull a fast one and say, "What about the jobs of everyone else in *my* company and all of the customers whose lives *I* impact?" To which I would reply that, first, by the very nature of the game, your customers left a long time ago—they've already found someone else to buy from, and they're just fine. Second, if the standards of your company are so low that the only people employed are those who could *never* get a job elsewhere—under *any* circumstances—then you have much bigger problems than the outcome of the "so what?" game, and you should probably go take care of those right now.

When I feel the weight of the world on my shoulders, this game releases me from being paralyzed by the consequences of failure. Matt and I often laugh that the worst-case scenario is that this whole thing blows up in our faces and we have to go out and find new jobs. And understanding this reality truly empowers me to do the work I have in front of me without fear or trepidation.

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Why So Serious?

Here are a few questions for people who take themselves far too seriously. (If you're offended by the previous sentence, then this is definitely for you.) Can you make your customers buy from you? Can you force your marketing to work? Can you control what the national economy does?

No. No. And no.

The sooner we realize that we're the surfers and not the waves, the sooner we can make the most of the opportunities we've been given.

I'm not saying for a second that we don't have some amount of agency and control over the circumstances of our lives, but if you think that taking extreme ownership will allow you to predict where your revenue will be in five years, you're delusional at best—and possibly a megalomaniac.

Experienced surfers know that they can't control waves. They ride free and easy, taking what they've been given and making the most of it, knowing that waves come and go, and no amount of worry or effort can change that.

While I've found that taking myself much too seriously as I pursue vainglory is an interesting way to pass the time, it really hasn't amounted to much in my life. Instead, wisdom would teach us that the key to making an impact is to focus on faithfulness rather than success.

Am I being faithful with what I've been given? That's the real question to ask. Because faithfulness implies a few things.

First off, what I have isn't mine—it's a gift—and viewing it that way has done amazing things to free me from my fragile ego. Second, the fact that I'm called to faithfulness rather than success means that the *way* I work is more important than the *outcome* of my work. Third, while everyone

else is worried about scale, speed, and growth (how can you not if the burden falls solely on you?), I can work at the appropriate pace of the tasks in front of me, trusting that long obedience in the same direction will lead me where I need to go.

The choice is really up to us. Do we want to live at a breakneck pace, taking ourselves so seriously that our worries choke the life out of everything—and everyone—around us, until we wither away into a hollow shell?

I know that I don't.

Two thousand years later, the words of the Great Rabbi still ring as true as ever: "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?"

No one.

So do what you can, where you can. And don't worry about the rest.



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Never Take Yourself Too Seriously

Now, as you read this, you might make the same mistake that I did a number of years ago in the early days of my company. You see, I was convinced that we needed to fight against my economy-sized ego by taking a stand that we would never take ourselves too seriously.

But there was a fundamental problem.

As you may have already noticed, the commitment to never take ourselves too seriously was ironically far too serious of a posture to adopt about the seriousness of which we took ourselves.

And while I leave you to contemplate the outworkings of that philosophical trap for a moment, I'd like to share a few things that happen when we uncouple ourselves from the belief that we're the brightest star in the universe.

First, we see things as they are, rather than how we'd like them to be. (It took me some time to dis-

cover that this is incredibly helpful when making important decisions.) Second, we aren't afraid to be wrong. (There is a surprising power I've discovered first-hand when smarter people than me are allowed to be right.) And finally, our ideas don't have to win. (I've unfortunately learned that being able to out-argue others into a bad idea isn't as effective as I once believed.)

At the end of the day, your work matters. Your customers matter. And you matter. So take it all seriously—just not *too* seriously.

The key to breaking free from the trappings of the over-inflated self isn't some nihilistic cynicism. It isn't some unfounded optimism or some *kumbaya* romanticism.

The key to not taking yourself too seriously—and to opening the door to the work that truly matters—*isn't* to think less of yourself.

It's simply to *think of yourself less*.