



## Ponder This!

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By John Ostrich, MD

**You need three characteristics to offset one or the other of those laws of thermodynamics.**

*Editor's Note: What follows is the text of a speech delivered to the graduating class of 2002 at the Blanding School of Management at the University of Central Texas by Holden C. Spew, Professor of Economics at Western Washington State College. Although the speech does not deal specifically with medical economics, the editors figured all of you have had plenty of that, and there is certainly a great deal of homespun good advice herein, especially applicable to the difficult economic times we are in today. Read on.*

President Wormley, Dean Garble, faculty, friends, students. I am honored to be here today as your commencement speaker.

After the speech, I will be at the back of the hall where I will be happy to sign copies of my latest book for any of you who might want to purchase one.

I bring you news. The future ain't what it used to be. The status quo is becoming the past, almost as fast as it can be created!

This is an application of the second, or maybe the third or the fourth law of thermodynamics, which states in essence that everything in the universe is dying and winding down to absolute zero, or at least pretty darn cold. If you are unfamiliar with this concept, it will not be I who will give you the physics lesson, but rather your competitors from Asia and Europe and even Russia who will bring you up to speed.

No one can tell what the future will bring, although I think that stockbrokers pretend to do this all the time. But you can be ready for it. Study the past and even the present — the Status Quo — and you will know how to act when the future comes knocking.

Notice I said "act", not "react." Action requires clear-headed thinking, whereas reaction is something you do while you try to get a grip on things and think of something to do so you won't be forced off a cliff or worse. I believe that there are three elements that you need to keep in mind so that you act properly when events become confusing.

First is "Ownership." Every person who successfully manages an enterprise, regardless of its nature, exhibits ownership of it. You as a manager personally make a concrete and measurable difference in the enterprise's chances of being viable and successful. I said you personally and I meant you personally. I am like that famous poster of Uncle Sam pointing at you from the minute you get up to the moment you close your eyes at night!

I do not mean you as part of a "team" of people who sit around a table and everyone there sits and watches everyone else talk, and I don't mean a "team" of people whose job it is to "watch" something. If you see people around you who are not lifting the log but only

holding on to the log while everybody else is doing the lifting, or who is just standing there watching, they should be fired or given something active to do.

If you find yourself in a position where what you do makes no difference to how things turn out, then you should quit or ask for something else to do. And explain why you are quitting or why you are asking for another task. Life is too short to be owning nothing but a lawn mower and a three-pack of Jockey briefs.

The successful "DotCom" guys are obvious examples of people who had ownership of their enterprises. They were smart and highly motivated and realized that their success depended on what they did, not on what someone else did for them.

Not all of them succeeded long-term, however, as we all know. There are many reasons for failure, bad luck included. And also what I call a lack of "Urgency."

Urgency is a direct consequence of Ownership because it is hard to imagine a person with a strong sense of Ownership who lacks a strong desire to get things done quickly and well and not let things coast along. An example of a huge organization that lacks Urgency is the U.S. Postal Service. People who lack Urgency are those folks we all know who have great, or at least interesting, ideas but who wait around for someone else to formalize those ideas or to tell them how to put them to practical use.

Having great ideas is not enough. Great ideas are a dime a dozen. As common as dirt. As plentiful as brilliant men and women.

Every year the top 10 graduates at Harvard and Yale and Stanford and Cal Tech and Oxford and the Sorbonne burst with new and great ideas. Every year, mind you! It's a wonder that they haven't taken over the world and have the rest of us working on assembly lines! The reason that they have not taken over the world is that most of them lack a sense of Urgency.

All those great ideas are just like so many bowls of Cream of Wheat unless they are brought to action. This sense of the follow-through, the drive to see the parts put together and put together correctly, is one of the most frequently omitted components of management education, in my opinion.

Is this a call to be bright eyed and bushy tailed? Not at all. Most people who are bright eyed and bushy tailed are, more often than not, fakers who hang around hoping someone else will do the hard work.

Urgency is what counts, and it is the only defense against that law of thermodynamics I mentioned at the start of this address, the only defense against the Great Cooling Off. The world is full of bright eyed and bushy tailed people who decided to watch the world go drifting by on the River Of Absolute Zero and who are only too eager to tell you their life's stories.

The third concomitant of a successful enterprise is "Thoroughness." A good way to illustrate what I mean is to look at two quotations separated by about one hundred years.

The authors of these aphorisms are not nearly as famous as their words. I expect all of you to thank me for revealing who they are. You may take notes.

The first is, "Genius is only a greater aptitude for patience."

The second is "Genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains."

The first was penned by Georges Buffon in the late 18th Century, and the second by Jane Ellice Hopkins in 1870. Since Buffon died in 1788, one might suppose that Ms. Hopkins was a plagiarist, but I doubt it. These are universal truths.

Thoroughness. By the way, would you like me to repeat these quotations and their authors so you can use them at your next cocktail party to annoy people?

Very little is accomplished by so-called "bursts of genius." That is what Buffon and Hopkins are trying to say. If something comes to pass because of a "burst of genius," it is only because the person who had the burst had a sense of ownership of the idea, an urgent need to bring it to action and the perspicacity and thoroughness to dot every "i" and cross every "t" and to dot and cross each one correctly.

These are pretty simple observations, and pretty obvious, I am sure most of you agree. But as Napoleon said, the man who, in the chaos of battle, does that which obviously must be done will be the victor.

Things that are obvious tend to become obscured by constant rephrasing, and repetition dulls them and we ignore them. You forget them until one day one comes up behind you, maybe at a cocktail party, taps you on the shoulder, and says, all bright eyed and bushy tailed, "Remember me?"

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