

These Things We Do

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Do you know the name Norman Borlaug? Me neither, but I think it's worth a minute of your time to learn a little more about an individual who might have been one of the single greatest human beings to ever walk this planet. His life and the way he approached his passion also offers a blueprint from which we can model our pursuits, and the framework we put around them.

Mr. Borlaug passed away this week at the age of 95. His work in developing revolutionary types of disease-resistant wheat, higher-yielding corn, and many other history-altering agricultural practices is credited with preventing the possible starvation of up to one billion people — that's with a **b** folks. Yet he passed with relative anonymity.

Although I can't confess any more knowledge of the man than what I read in an [on-line post](#) [1], based on what his colleagues had to say it seems that his relative anonymity bothered him very little. His work was his passion, and despite being one of the fortunate few who can point directly to its Nobel Prize winning impact, the related notoriety, or lack of it, appears to have been a non-factor. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack described him as "Simply one of the world's best. A determined, dedicated, but humble man."

I'm not writing about Mr. Borlaug in an effort to bring accolades to an unsung hero — although there may never be a more viable candidate. Rather, he serves as a prime example of the best way to go about one's work in this age of recognition-based financial incentives, ridiculous reality show quasi-celebrities and a mainstream media that shifts its focus based on the next hot button topic.

We all have performance metrics that our supervisors may use or hold us accountable to in determining the quality or impact of our work. This, in addition to a more demanding consumer populous has led to shorter product lifespans, greater competition along more fronts and an intense focus on tracking results and understanding ROI. Some of these procedures are necessary, productive and help identify the positive and negative factors that either contribute to or detract from our goals. However, I think there's a problem when we start to rely upon these sources, and the accolades that may or may not accompany them, as our sole measuring stick or motivational theme.

It can be easy to get caught up in whatever data, spreadsheet or tracking mechanism we're viewing and lose sight of the most important factors that will always contribute to individual or project success — the passion of a human being

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to innovate and win. I'm not saying that the above-mentioned guideposts are inappropriate or unnecessary. I know they can be extremely helpful and often part of standard operating procedures, but I'm also confident in saying that Norman Borlaug was probably driven less by the Nobel Prize, its corresponding inner circle notoriety or any validation of his work as he was by the passion he had for feeding the world.

I think that when one chooses a path based more on the things that drive them to get out of bed in the morning, the corresponding recognition, financial well-being, remainder of items documented throughout Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and most importantly, the proper results, will fall in to place accordingly. I guess my point is that while few would know Norman Borlaug if they shared an elevator with him or if he occupied the corresponding seat on a cramped plane — he could not have cared less.

Similarly, whether you're designing a new type of alternatively fueled engine or simply writing a column, the best results won't be garnered solely by paying tribute to a set of procedure-based performance metrics or professional recognition. But continuing to fuel the passion that drove you to get involved in the first place will.

Not all of us have the ability to feed a billion people, but when we do these things we do every day driven by passion and priority, the result will be more fulfilling for all involved.

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<http://www.chem.info/blogs/2009/09/these-things-we-do>

Links:

[1] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/scripts/Products-Borlaug-Who-Saved-Millions-From.asp>