

The 80/20 Principle: The Secret to Achieving More with Less

by Richard Koch
Doubleday, New York 2008

This review is certainly not intended to give ringing praise to Richard Koch or his book. The book is certainly not written from a Christian perspective. If anything, the author approaches most philosophical questions about work and personal life from the perspective of enlightened self-interest. The goal of life is to reach our potential in happiness via success and influence and wealth. For instance, developing friends and allies in our personal lives and at work is pursued primarily from the perspective of the gain in happiness or success such friends and allies bring to our lives. Those who may be familiar with the rational self interest of an Ayn Rand, would find much similarity here, although Rand is an objectivist and Koch is much more postmodern, believing there is no objective reality (228).

Yet Koch, like anyone who is a keen observer of life, can still bring forward a key insight that can be of help even to those who reject much of how that person employs that insight according to his philosophical beliefs.

The basic principle of this book is just such a gem that can be dug out of the swamp of Koch's otherwise self-serving approach to life. It is what Koch calls the 80/20 principle that gives the book its name. The principle is taken from a pattern discovered by an Italian economist by the name of Vilfredo Pareto (1843-1923). Here is a basic summary of the 80/20 principle from the first chapter of the book.

The 80/20 Principle asserts that a minority of causes, inputs, or effort usually lead to a majority of the results, outputs, or rewards. Taken literally, this means that, for example, 80 percent of what you achieve in your job comes from 20 percent of the time spent. Thus for all practical purposes, four-fifths of the effort – a dominant part of it – is largely irrelevant. (4)

While the exact imbalance is not always precisely 80/20, those round numbers are used as a helpful memory device.

What benefit can the 80/20 principle have for busy pastors? It can certainly be helpful to give careful thought to whether a significant percentage of what keeps us all too often running around is really advancing the cause of the gospel. We can easily get caught up in the busy-ness of our culture, without really analyzing whether such busy-ness actually advances the kingdom of God. Certainly we must be very careful when applying the 80/20 principle to the work of God's kingdom. So much of the fruit of what we do is hidden. We live by faith, not sight. And certainly, Koch would have no time for bearing the cross. Yet it is certainly valid to stop and ask ourselves whether the cross we are bearing is one Christ gave us or whether we have chosen some self-inflicted crosses that bog us down and accomplish almost nothing that matters for the kingdom.

While I have often failed to apply this well to my life and ministry, there has been one touchstone I have tried to apply again and again. When it comes to evaluating the myriad of things beckoning for our time in ministry, I have often tried to ask, "What will get more of the gospel to more people more often?" That which prepares me and others to do that, or that directly accomplishes that, always deserves the lion's share of time and attention.

Allow this reviewer to finish the review of Koch's book and its possible application to pastors (which, of course, is not the focus of Koch's book) by sharing what I believe is a closely related insight that Eugene Peterson makes in two particularly thoughtful pages from his book *The Contemplative Pastor*. Peterson's

words also remind us that we evaluate progress and success in God's kingdom differently than those who use only a business model of success.

In Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, there is a turbulent scene in which a whaleboat scuds across a frothing ocean in pursuit of the great, white whale, Moby Dick. The sailors are laboring fiercely, every muscle taut, all attention and energy concentrated on the task. The cosmic conflict between good and evil is joined; chaotic sea and demonic sea monster versus the morally outraged man, Captain Ahab. In this boat, however, there is one man who does nothing. He doesn't hold an oar; he doesn't perspire; he doesn't shout. He is languid in the crash and the cursing. This man is the harpooner, quiet and poised, waiting. And then this sentence: "To insure the greatest efficiency in the dart, the harpooners of this world must start to their feet out of idleness, and not out of toil."

Melville's sentence is a text to set alongside the psalmist's, "Be still, and know that I am God" (Ps. 46:10), and alongside Isaiah's "In repentance and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength" (Isa. 30:15).

Pastors know there is something radically wrong with the world. We are also engaged in doing something about it. The stimulus of conscience, the memory of ancient outrage, and the challenge of biblical command involve us in the anarchic sea that is the world. The white whale, symbol of evil, and the crippled captain, personification of violated righteousness, are joined in battle. History is a novel of spiritual conflict. In such a world, noise is inevitable, and immense energy is expended. But if there is no harpooner in the boat, there will be no proper finish to the chase. Or if the harpooner is exhausted, having abandoned his assignment and become an oarsman, he will not be ready and accurate when it is time to throw his javelin.

Somehow it always seems more compelling to assume the work of the oarsman, laboring mightily in a moral cause, throwing our energy into a fray we know has immortal consequence. And it always seems more dramatic to take on the outrage of a Captain Ahab, obsessed with a vision of vengeance and retaliation, brooding over the ancient injury done by the Enemy. There is, though, other important work to do. Someone must throw the dart. Some must be harpooners.

The metaphors Jesus used for the life of ministry are frequently images of the single, the small, and the quiet, which have effects far in excess of their appearance: salt, leaven, seed. Our culture publicizes the opposite emphasis: the big, the multitudinous, the noisy. It is, then, a strategic necessity that pastors deliberately ally themselves with the quiet, poised harpooners, and not leap, frenzied, to the oars. There is far more need that we develop the skills of the harpooner than the muscles of the oarsman. It is far more biblical to learn quietness and attentiveness before God than to be overtaken by what John Oman named the twin perils of ministry, "flurry and worry." For flurry dissipates energy, and worry constipates it.

Years ago I noticed, as all pastors must, that when a pastor left a neighboring congregation, the congregational life carried on very well, thank you. A guest preacher was assigned to conduct Sunday worship, nearby pastors took care of the funerals, weddings, and crisis counseling. A congregation would go for months, sometimes as long as a year or two, without a regular pastor. And I thought, All these things I am so busy doing – they aren't being done in that pastorless congregation, and nobody seems to mind. I asked myself, What if I, without leaving, quit doing them right now? Would anybody mind? I did, and they don't. (24-25)

How much of what we do is merely busy-work that perhaps makes us feel needed and important, but that does not really advance the kingdom of God? Perhaps it is not 80% of our daily work. But could it be a larger percentage than we might at first be willing to admit? For the insight to consider that possible imbalance in our lives, The 80/20 Principle can prove helpful, even if in the reading we will need to do some significant sorting of what is wheat (some) and what is chaff (most).