



Stanford eCorner

Imperfections Aren't Always Important

Elon Musk, *SpaceX*

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During a special appearance at Stanford University on Oct. 7, 2015, Elon Musk discusses the double-edged sword of paying close attention to tiny details. The iconic entrepreneur behind SpaceX, Tesla Motors and Paypal was on stage with DFJ General Partner Steve Jurvetson to kick off STVP Future Fest, a daylong series of events exploring how technology and scientific breakthroughs will shape society.



Transcript

When something's off-- the little thing-- how do you experience that? It drives me bananas. The problem is, you can train yourself to pay attention to the tiny details. I think almost anyone can. Although this is very much a double-edged sword, because then you see all the little details. And then little things drive you crazy. But most people don't consciously see the small details. But they do subconsciously see them. Sort of your mind takes into yourself an overall impression. And you know if something is appealing or not, even though you may not be able to point out exactly why. And it's a summation of these many small details.

So most of us experience that as a-- oh, I think that's ugly, or I think that's beautiful, or wow, that's elegant, but can't break it down. You mentioned something in passing-- you can train yourself in this, though? Yeah, you can train yourself, I think. You can make yourself pay attention to why. You essentially bring the subconscious awareness into conscious awareness. I wish I could do that. How do you do that? Just pay really close attention. Almost like a meditation on the object, and trying to find the details? Why do I not like this? Is that what-- Yes, look closely and carefully. And for any given object, it's geometry. I heard someone worked for Steve Jobs. And the thought occurred to me as well.

I worked briefly with him, and I could only experience as a visceral agitation with imperfection. And that's just wrong. Like, that has to be fixed. I have to turn it off. Otherwise, I can't go through life. It's just-- The world around you, or even in-- Yeah, yeah. Because there's always something wrong somewhere all the time. And so you really have to turn it off. Otherwise, the mental list of things that are wrong just drives you crazy.