



Now You See it ...

This story - because it contravenes a long-held personal rule of mine - might be a bit difficult to write, and I must certainly preface it with a disclaimer that 'names have been changed to protect the guilty ...'

The rule is simple: 'Praise in public; criticize in private,' and it is in my opinion the very first thing that any kind of manager must learn. All of us make mistakes now and then, and none of us appreciate being publicly ridiculed for them. But human nature being what it is, we are quite happy to have knowledge of our achievements broadcast widely!

After that introduction, you are probably surmising that I intend to discuss some of the problems we are encountering in my workshop, and you would be right! It has been a difficult couple of weeks. I was away from the workshop for over a week on a recent trip abroad, and while I was away one of our printers was a tad careless with the work, and inadvertently spoiled the entire batch of prints she was working on. Shortly after returning, when checking the work of another of the ladies, I found that she too had misregistered one of the blocks on a print batch, and they were all to be rejected. On top of this, on opening a package of prints that we had ordered from an outside printer - a top-level professional - I found that he had (apparently willfully) ignored my instructions, and this entire batch did not meet our standards for sale.

Well, such is life when you depend on other people for getting work done, especially when most of them are trainees, and there is no point in getting upset or angry about it. But it is the 'criticize in private' part that is causing me difficulty. In the case of the spoiled work done by my own trainees, there is no way to *hide* the errors. Our workroom is very small, and everybody can see everything that is going on. When each batch of prints is passed from the printer over to the lady who prepares and packs them, the sheets of paper have to be accounted for, and when the ledgers are filled out, everybody can see the results.

And of course, when I then speak to the printer to discuss the situation, trying to understand what went wrong, everybody else is unavoidably listening in. The only thing to do really, is to keep calm, avoid confrontation, and as far as is possible, turn the event into a learning experience so that the error will not be repeated, neither by that printer, nor (hopefully) by anybody else.

Because woodblock printmaking work is inherently repetitive - performing the same actions over and over again, on a new sheet of paper each time - it is vitally important that the printer catch errors as they occur. If one of the blocks becomes slightly misregistered and this is not noticed immediately, many sheets can be spoiled. And it is this 'catching' that my trainees are consistently not good at. After more than 30 years of making prints, it is totally second nature for me to scan each impression as it comes off the block, and for my eye to instantly zero in on any aspect of the sheet that doesn't 'look right'. Even the smallest speck of sumi misplaced somewhere among a tangle of design lines will still jump out at me, and I will be able to stop and make the necessary correction.

Whether or not this absolutely essential skill can be taught is an open question for me at this point. I can do it well; the trainees here are very poor at it. I can only hope that their own disappointment at having wasted so much paper, time, and potential revenue leads them to develop these skills as quickly as possible. Because at the rate we threw away paper last week, we'll be bankrupt in short order!

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