

MY WEIRD PROMPTS

Podcast Transcript

EPISODE #203

The Power of the SOP: Why Even Experts Need a Checklist

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EPISODE SYNOPSIS

In this episode of My Weird Prompts, Corn and Herman dive into the fascinating history and psychology of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). From the tragic 1935 crash of the Boeing "Flying Fortress" to the life-saving surgical checklists used in modern medicine, they explore how offloading memory to paper prevents "failures of ineptitude." Learn how to apply these high-stakes systems to your daily life and discover the best digital tools to help you stop relying on your brain and start relying on the process.

DANIEL'S PROMPT

Daniel

"I'd like to discuss the use of checklists and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs). I've always been fascinated by how aviation uses them for everything from pre-startup to landing, and I think there are many applications for this in both business and personal life—like for monthly invoicing or even car maintenance. I'd love to learn more about the evolution of these procedures in aviation, other industries that use SOPs, and if there are any good checklist apps that allow for recurring lists rather than just one-off to-do tasks."

TRANSCRIPT

Corn

Hey everyone, welcome back to My Weird Prompts. We are right around the three hundred episode mark now, which feels like a pretty cool milestone to reflect on. I am Corn, and I am here with my brother and housemate.

Herman

Herman Poppleberry, at your service. And yeah, three hundred episodes and we still have not run out of things to talk about. Though, to be fair, Daniel makes it easy on us by sending in these rabbit holes.

Corn

It is true. Daniel was telling me the other day about his late night YouTube habits. Apparently, he has been falling down this rabbit hole of cockpit videos. You know the ones, where it is just a fixed camera in a Boeing seven forty seven or an Airbus A three twenty, and you just watch the pilots work.

Herman

Oh, those are mesmerizing. It is almost like a form of industrial A-S-M-R. The clicking of the switches, the very calm, measured communication. It is a masterclass in professional composure.

Corn

Exactly. And Daniel noticed something that really struck him. No matter how experienced these pilots are, with thousands of flight hours, they never just wing it. They are constantly referencing these little books or tablets. They are running through checklists and Standard Operating Procedures for every single phase of the flight. From the moment they step into the cockpit to the moment they shut down the engines at the gate.

Herman

It is the ultimate expression of humility in the face of complexity. And Daniel's prompt today is basically asking: why do we not do this for everything? If it works for a two hundred ton aircraft, why are we not using S-O-Ps for our monthly invoicing, our car maintenance, or even just our morning routines? He wants to know about the history of these procedures in aviation, where else they are being used, and if there are any tools that actually help us manage recurring checklists rather than just one off to do items.

Corn

I love this because it touches on a fundamental human limitation. We think we are better at remembering things than we actually are. We equate intelligence with memory, but in high stakes environments, that is a dangerous mistake. Herman, I know you have looked into the history of this. The aviation checklist actually has a very specific, and somewhat tragic, origin story, right?

Herman

It does. It goes back to October thirtieth, nineteen thirty five. The United States Army Air Corps was holding a competition for a new long range bomber. Boeing had developed the Model two ninety nine. It was this incredible, four engine beast. It was faster and could carry more than anything else at the time. Everyone called it the Flying Fortress. It was the clear favorite to win the contract.

Corn

Right, I remember reading about this. It was basically the most advanced piece of technology in the world at that moment.

Herman

Exactly. So, they take it up for a demonstration flight at Wright Field in Ohio. The pilot was Major Ployer Peter Hill, the Chief of the Flying Branch and one of the most experienced test pilots in the Army. He had Boeing's chief test pilot, Leslie Tower, right there with him. But shortly after takeoff, the plane pitched up sharply, stalled, crashed, and exploded. Major Hill and Leslie Tower were both killed.

Corn

And the investigation found it was not a mechanical failure, right?

Herman

No, the plane was perfect. What happened was that the Model two ninety nine was so much more complex than previous planes that the crew simply forgot one step. They forgot to release the gust locks, which are the mechanisms that keep the control surfaces from flapping around while the plane is parked. Leslie Tower actually realized the mistake mid air and tried to reach the locks, but he could not get to them in time. Because the locks were still on, they could not steer properly once they were in the air.

Corn

It is crazy to think that a pilot with that much experience could forget something so basic.

Herman

That was exactly the takeaway. The newspapers at the time literally wrote that the plane was too much airplane for one man to fly. They thought it was too complex for human cognition. But instead of giving up on the plane, a group of test pilots came together and created something revolutionary. They did not suggest more training. They did not suggest a more intelligent pilot. They created a simple, pilot's checklist. Just a small card with the essential steps for takeoff, flight, and landing.

Corn

And that changed everything.

Herman

It did. With the checklist, the Army went on to fly the Flying Fortress for eighteen million miles without a single accident attributed to that specific type of error. It proved that the solution to complexity is not more brainpower, it is a system that offloads the memory requirement from the brain to the page.

Corn

It is fascinating because it is a shift from the hero model to the process model. We want to believe in the expert who just knows what to do, but the reality of the twenty first century is that systems are too complex for the hero model to be reliable.

Herman

Exactly. And that brings us to the broader world of Standard Operating Procedures, or S-O-Ps. An S-O-P is basically a set of step by step instructions compiled by an organization to help workers carry out complex routine operations. The goal is efficiency, quality output, and uniformity of performance.

Corn

I think people often hear S-O-P and they think of red tape or bureaucracy. They think it is something that stifles creativity. But if you look at industries where the stakes are high, like medicine, the S-O-P is what actually enables the experts to focus their creativity where it matters. Herman, you have mentioned Atul Gawande's work before.

Herman

Yes, The Checklist Manifesto. Gawande is a surgeon who looked at the aviation model and wondered why hospitals were not doing the same thing. He worked with the World Health Organization to implement a simple nineteen item surgical safety checklist in eight very different hospitals around the world—from Seattle and London to New Delhi and Ifakara, Tanzania.

Corn

And the results were staggering.

Herman

They were. In those eight hospitals, major complications dropped by thirty six percent and deaths fell by forty seven percent. Just from a piece of paper that made everyone in the room stop for a quote unquote time out to confirm the patient's name, the site of the surgery, and whether they had all the right equipment.

Corn

It is interesting that the biggest hurdle to implementing that was not the cost or the complexity, it was the ego of the doctors. They felt like they did not need a list.

Herman

That is the psychological barrier we all face. We feel like we are too smart for a checklist. But as Gawande points out, we have two types of failure. There is failure of ignorance, where we do not know how to do something. And then there is failure of ineptitude, where we know how to do it, but we fail to apply that knowledge correctly. Checklists solve for ineptitude.

Corn

So let us bring this down to the level Daniel was asking about. Business and personal life. I think about my own workflow for this podcast. We have a routine for how we prep, how we record, how we handle the files afterward. Before we had a formal process, I cannot tell you how many times I forgot to hit the backup recorder or forgot to check the gain levels on your microphone, Herman.

Herman

Oh, I remember. We would be twenty minutes into a great deep dive and then realized we were recording on the laptop's built in mic instead of the high end gear.

Corn

Exactly. Now, we have a literal checklist on the wall. It takes thirty seconds to run through, but it saves us hours of frustration. And Daniel mentioned monthly invoicing. That is a perfect example of a recurring task that is just complex enough to be annoying but routine enough that you think you can do it from memory.

Herman

Invoicing is a classic S-O-P candidate. You have to verify the hours, check the contract rate, ensure the tax calculations are correct for that specific jurisdiction, attach the receipts, and send it to the right contact person. If you miss one of those, the invoice gets rejected, and your cash flow is delayed by two weeks.

Corn

And then there is the car maintenance example. Most people just wait for a light to turn on the dashboard. But if you have an S-O-P for a monthly car check—checking the tire pressure, the oil level, the coolant, the wiper fluid—you prevent the light from ever coming on in the first place. You are moving from reactive maintenance to proactive maintenance.

Herman

I think the key for personal life is distinguishing between a to do list and a checklist. A to do list is a list of things you want to accomplish today. It is ephemeral. Once you do it, you cross it off and it is gone. A checklist or an S-O-P is a repeatable process. It is something you do every time a certain trigger occurs.

Corn

That is the distinction Daniel was looking for in terms of apps. Most apps are built for to do lists. You create a task, you check it, it disappears. But if you want a recurring procedure, you need something that resets or generates a new instance of that list every time.

Herman

Right. There are a few different ways to approach this. If you are looking at the professional or business side, there are tools specifically designed for S-O-Ps. One that is very popular in the tech and business world is called Process Street. By now, they have actually integrated a lot of A-I features where you can just describe a process and it will draft the S-O-P for you with conditional logic. For example, if the invoice is over five thousand dollars, it automatically adds a step to get manager approval.

Corn

That sounds like it could get complicated to set up, but once it is there, it is like having a co pilot.

Herman

Exactly. Another one for business is called Manifestly, or just Manifest. It is very focused on those aviation style checklists. It is clean, it is easy to use, and it has a great Slack integration so you can run through a checklist without even leaving your chat app.

Corn

What about for personal use? I know a lot of people use things like Todoist or OmniFocus. Those have recurring task features, but they do not always handle a sub list of steps very well.

Herman

That is the challenge. If you use something like Todoist, you can set a task for Monthly Invoicing to repeat on the first of every month. And you can add sub tasks. When you check off the main task, Todoist is smart enough to reset all the sub tasks for the next month. TickTick is another great one for this—it actually has a dedicated habit tracker and a recurring task engine that is very robust for freelancers.

Corn

I have also seen people use Notion for this. You can create a template for a page. So, every time you have a new client project or a new monthly maintenance cycle, you just click New from Template and it generates a fresh checklist for you.

Herman

Notion is great for that because you can include context. You can have the checklist at the top, but then underneath, you can have the instructions, the links to the websites you need to visit, the contact info. It becomes a living document of how to do the thing.

Corn

I want to go back to the idea of why this is so effective. We talked about cognitive offloading. In psychology, there is this concept of the Zeigarnik effect. It is the idea that our brains hold onto unfinished tasks, which creates a kind of background mental noise or anxiety.

Herman

Right, it is like having too many tabs open in your browser. It slows down the processor.

Corn

Exactly. When you have a solid S-O-P, you are essentially closing those tabs. You do not have to worry about whether you remembered the oil change or the tax filing, because the system will tell you when it is time and exactly how to do it. You are freeing up that mental energy for actual thinking, rather than just remembering.

Herman

There is also the aspect of continuous improvement. In aviation, they call it the Black Box Thinking. Every time something goes wrong, or even just slightly off, they look at the checklist and ask: how can we change the procedure to make sure this never happens again?

Corn

This reminds me of what we discussed back in episode two hundred and seven, when we were talking about computer use agents. We talked about how we are moving toward a world where A-I can actually execute these S-O-Ps for us. But for the A-I to do it, the human first has to define the process.

Herman

That is a crucial point. You cannot automate chaos. If you do not have a standard procedure, an A-I agent is just going to make mistakes faster than you can. Building an S-O-P is the first step toward automation. It is about documenting the logic of your life or your business.

Corn

I think a lot of people resist this because they think it makes life boring. They think it turns them into a robot. But I find the opposite is true. When I have my routine tasks locked down with a checklist, I feel more free. I am not constantly checking my mental list. I can be more present in whatever I am actually doing.

Herman

It is the paradox of structure. Structure creates freedom. If you know exactly how you are going to handle your administrative work on Monday morning, you do not have to spend all Sunday evening dreading it or trying to remember what you need to do.

Corn

Let us talk about some of the common mistakes people make when they start creating these procedures. I know for me, the biggest mistake is making them too long. If a checklist has fifty items, I am going to start skipping things.

Herman

That is a classic trap. In aviation, they distinguish between a Normal Checklist and an Emergency Checklist. A Normal Checklist is usually just the critical items. It is not every single thing you do, it is the things that, if you miss them, something bad happens.

Corn

So, it is the Pause and Check model rather than the Read and Do model?

Herman

Exactly. In a Read and Do, you read the instruction, do it, then read the next one. That is good for things you rarely do, like assembling furniture. But for routine tasks, you want a Do and Check. You do the task from memory, and then you pause at a specific point to run through the checklist and make sure you did not miss anything. It is much faster and less intrusive.

Corn

That is a huge distinction. If I am doing my monthly invoicing, I know how to do it. I do not need a manual. But at the end, I need a five item checklist to make sure the invoice number is updated, the date is correct, and the attachment is actually there.

Herman

Exactly. Another mistake is not updating the procedure. A Standard Operating Procedure should be a living document. If you find a faster way to do something, or if a software update changes the layout of a website you use, you need to update the S-O-P immediately. Otherwise, the system breaks down because you stop trusting the list.

Corn

It is also important to consider the environment where you are using these. Daniel mentioned car maintenance. If you are out in the garage, you probably do not want to be fumbling with a complex app on your phone with greasy hands. Maybe for that, a physical, laminated sheet on the wall is actually better.

Herman

Low tech is often the best tech for S-O-Ps. There is a reason pilots still have physical cards in the cockpit, even with all those digital displays. If the power goes out or the screen freezes, you still need to know how to land the plane.

Corn

I wonder about the application of this in social or creative contexts. Do you think there is such a thing as an S-O-P for, say, hosting a dinner party?

Herman

It sounds cold, but absolutely. Think about it. Most of the stress of hosting is the timing. Making sure the appetizers are out when people arrive, the main course is ready at the right time, and you are not stuck in the kitchen for three hours. If you have a timeline and a checklist, you can actually enjoy your guests.

Corn

It is basically what professional event planners do. They have a run of show. They have a checklist for every vendor and every transition. They are not leaving it to chance.

Herman

And if you apply that to your own life, you are basically becoming the professional event planner of your own existence. It is about taking the things that cause stress and turning them into a predictable process.

Corn

I want to touch on what Daniel asked about recurring apps again. We mentioned Todoist and Notion. There is also a dedicated app called Checklist dot com. It is very simple, but it is built entirely around the idea of reusable checklists. You can create a library of procedures and then launch an instance of one whenever you need it.

Herman

That is great for things like travel packing. You have your standard list for a weekend trip, a beach trip, a business trip. You do not want to recreate that every time. You just launch the template, check the items as they go into the suitcase, and then clear the list for next time.

Corn

I actually used a checklist for our trip to the Galilee last month. I always used to forget my contact lens solution. Every single time. I would have to find a pharmacy in a strange town at ten o'clock at night. This time, I put it on a recurring packing list. I felt like a genius when I opened my bag and it was just there.

Herman

It is a small victory, but those small victories add up. They reduce the friction of life.

Corn

So, if someone is listening to this and they are convinced, where should they start? You do not want to try to create an S-O-P for your entire life in one weekend.

Herman

No, that is a recipe for burnout. I would say, look for the one thing that you do at least once a month that consistently causes you a little bit of anxiety or where you frequently make a small mistake.

Corn

Like the invoicing Daniel mentioned.

Herman

Exactly. Or your household budget. Or even just your deep cleaning routine. Start with one. Write down the steps as you are doing it. Do not try to imagine them, actually do the task and record every step. Then, the next time you do that task, use your list. You will immediately find things you missed or things that are unclear. Refine it.

Corn

And once that one is working, then you can add another. It is about building a library of your own personal best practices.

Herman

I think there is also a real value in sharing these. In a business context, this is how you onboard new people. But even in a household, if everyone knows the S-O-P for, say, closing up the house at night or handling a minor plumbing emergency, things run so much smoother.

Corn

We actually have that in our house in Jerusalem. We have a shared note that explains how the water heater timer works and where the main shutoff valve is for the water. It sounds basic, but when there is a leak at two in the morning, you do not want to be guessing.

Herman

That is a perfect example of a high stakes, low frequency S-O-P. You almost never need it, but when you do, you need it to be perfect and accessible.

Corn

I also find it interesting to look at industries we do not usually associate with this. Like filmmaking. A film set is a massive, chaotic environment with hundreds of people. But it runs on very strict S-O-Ps. The way they call out a take, the way the camera assistant marks the slate, the way the sound mixer logs the files. If they did not have those procedures, it would be impossible to edit the movie later.

Herman

It is the same in high end kitchens. The Mise en Place is essentially a physical S-O-P. Everything in its place, a standard way of prepping every ingredient. It is what allows a chef to produce a hundred identical, high quality meals in a single night.

Corn

It really comes back to that idea that the more you standardize the routine, the more you can excel at the unique. The chef can focus on the flavor because the prep is standardized. The pilot can focus on the weather and the navigation because the engine start is standardized.

Herman

And for us, we can focus on the deep dive discussion because the recording process is standardized.

Corn

Exactly. It is about identifying the parts of your life that are essentially mechanical and treating them as such.

Herman

One thing I want to mention, which is a bit more technical, is the role of checklists in cybersecurity. We have talked about this in passing before, but most security breaches are not the result of some genius hacker. They are the result of someone forgetting to apply a patch or leaving a default password in place.

Corn

Right, it is a failure of ineptitude, not ignorance.

Herman

Precisely. That is why the most secure organizations use automated S-O-Ps. They use scripts that run every night to check for those common errors. They have essentially turned the checklist into code.

Corn

Which brings us back to the future of these procedures. As we get more integrated with digital assistants and A-I agents, our personal S-O-Ps are going to become the instructions for our digital proxies.

Herman

I can imagine a world where I just say to my assistant, Run the monthly invoicing procedure, and it knows exactly which files to look at, which clients to contact, and it just pings me at the end to say, All done, do you want to review the drafts?

Corn

But it can only do that if you have done the work of defining what that procedure is. You have to be the architect of your own systems.

Herman

That is the takeaway. Be the architect, not just the laborer. Use your brain for the high level design, and use a checklist for the repetitive execution.

Corn

Well, I think we have covered a lot of ground here. From the tragic crash of the Flying Fortress to the peace of mind of a well packed suitcase.

Herman

It is a powerful tool. And it is basically free. It just requires a little bit of humility and a little bit of discipline.

Corn

I think I am going to go audit my own invoicing process after this. I am pretty sure I am still doing it in a way that is more stressful than it needs to be.

Herman

I will help you with that. We can make it a house S-O-P.

Corn

Deal. And hey, if you are listening to this and you have a weirdly specific S-O-P that has changed your life, we would love to hear about it. You can get in touch through the contact form at [myweirdprompts dot com](http://myweirdprompts.com).

Herman

And if you are finding the show helpful, please consider leaving us a review on your podcast app or a rating on Spotify. It genuinely helps other people find these rabbit holes.

Corn

It really does. We appreciate all of you who have been with us through these three hundred plus episodes. It has been an incredible journey so far.

Herman

Thanks to Daniel for the prompt. It is always fun to look at the systems behind the scenes.

Corn

Definitely. This has been My Weird Prompts. You can find us on Spotify and at our website, [myweirdprompts dot com](http://myweirdprompts.com). I am Corn.

Herman

And I am Herman Poppleberry.

Corn

We will see you next time.

Herman

Until then, keep those checklists handy.

Corn

Goodbye everyone.