

Six Principles for 21st Century Leaders:

In my 15+ years of work with organizations and senior executives, I found the following six principles, derived from spiritual literature to be quite helpful in coaching executives to become successful in these times of great change. I discussed these principles about six years ago in a talk and this article came out of it. A brief commentary about each principle is described in this article, although the best way to learn more about them is to practice them regularly.

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The six principles are:

- 1) Clarity of intention
- 2) Awareness of self and what is going on around you
- 3) Empathy for one another
- 4) Appreciation of others and for what you received
- 5) Stretching beyond your own limits
- 6) Letting go of what does not work and old mindsets.

These six principles are interdependent and describe a cycle. When you follow this cycle, you develop new competencies and achieve higher levels of success. The essence of these principles is self-knowledge. The more you practice the six principles, the better you begin to know yourself.

1) Clarity of Intention: Many of us have an idea of what we are after and the direction we are heading when we take on a project. Most often though, we do not have clarity about our goal let alone knowledge of how to measure success if we achieve it.

Intention is critical to achieving success. When the intention is not clear, attention shifts from one thing (one desire) to another and leads to confusion. In such circumstances, we often end up compromising our own efforts and receive less than what we desired or even deserved. Without a crystal clear intention, we rarely experience a sense of accomplishment even if our more general intentions are fulfilled.

How do we increase the clarity of our own intention? Ask yourself the following questions:

What is it that I really want? What evokes passion and joy in my heart?
How passionately do I feel about it?

What am I willing to give up (sacrifice) to achieve the desired goal?
If I have more than one intention, which one should I first attempt?

These questions bring to the surface some of our assumptions and passion and help us to prioritize our intentions (and hence our actions). Finally, exploring your intention creates a pathway to discovering your unique purpose in life!

Will clear intention guarantee success? No, but it is a good beginning. When we are aligned with what we want at head, heart and gut level, chances are our actions are also aligned and, we have more likelihood of getting the result we are seeking. Practicing this step is not as easy as it may appear. Constant practice helps us to stay focused on what we want until we get it. That naturally leads to the second step: becoming aware of what is happening around us.

2) Awareness: The key message is stay awake and be aware while you are focusing on accomplishing something and not stop not until you reach your goal. Awareness is of two kinds: self-awareness and the awareness of the world around you. They go together and are like front of the hand and the back of the hand. We are conditioned by our families and our society and are continually being shaped by the environment in which we live. When we develop awareness of who we are, we also begin to develop awareness of what we are not. When we can develop a deeper awareness of where the other person is coming from and remember that we also are a player in creating the situation, we may be able to relax and become interested in the other and his/her point of view.

How does awareness help us become successful? Let us say that my dream is to start a software company and take it public in three years. While my success criterion is pretty sharply defined, there is a lot of work that I need to do such as understand the customer, the competitors, the market and world realities, and my personal realities. I need to assess my own key personal competencies and find others whose competencies compliment my own to create a strong management team. Of course, creating a successful product and a strategy to market it successfully requires hard work, and there is no substitute for that. If all goes well, my dream may come true. In that respect, my self awareness (of my competencies and weaknesses) and my awareness of the world around me (the possibilities in the market place and offerings from competition) help me to make what is possible to be real.

Awareness is dynamic. It is about continually being vigilant against our complacency. We need to continually and dynamically reassess where we are with respect to where we want to go and where we were yesterday.

What blocks our awareness? There are five mental processes that act as enemies to awareness. They are: our own expectations and standards, false/incorrect knowledge, our wild imagination (and attachment to it), sleepwalking through our life, and memory of past successes and failures. Let me elaborate.

Each of us have our own set of standards and internal expectations. We pick them up from people whom we respect and like the most. Whatever are their standards, we attempt to live up to them even though our competencies and passion might not allow us to reach those expectations and meet those standards we unconsciously picked up. Only by becoming aware of those standards we could do something about them.

We some times assume things about ourselves and others that are plainly not true. Because we did not face any challenges when we first assumed them, we some times take it for granted that they must be true. Especially if we get some proof that we might be right in one extreme condition, we may think that our assumptions are universally true. This is the source of our misidentified and wrong knowledge. Once we have such knowledge, we rarely verify that in the real world and it becomes a block to awareness.

Imagination is certainly better than wrong knowledge except that imagination creates its own traps. There is time for dreaming and fantasizing and there is time for focusing and getting things done. Unfortunately, imagination, at times, can be so seductive that we are unwilling to accept that it is fantasy and reality does not match up with it and become a block to awareness.

While sleeping through life is an obvious block to awareness, faulty memory can also trap us in believing that our memory is right and the new data is wrong. I found that past successes are bigger blocks to awareness than past failures. Of course, failure is a stepping stone to success if we can learn from it but it is not commonly done. Summarizing, we have to pay special attention to what blocks our awareness. It is a challenge for many of us accept the fact that our own standards, our knowledge, and our imagination can take over our mind and make us either proud, sloppy or negligent. Laziness is the biggest enemy of success.

How do you develop and practice awareness? You can begin with becoming aware of what you eat and what you drink. Becoming mindful of what goes in your body can make you stop eating mindlessly and you can have choice about what you eat. You can also begin to pay attention to your own thoughts/feelings and body sensations. They give you early warning signals if you pay attention.

You can become aware of your own thought processes by using reflective or contemplative practices, writing a journal regularly and continual examination of your intentions. Most awareness is tacit, but you can learn to pay better attention to your body signals, pains and pleasures, and energy shifts. All these are key to developing a higher awareness and acute sensitivity to your own body and mind. Sometimes, you don't feel right. Other times, you feel tightness in the chest. Another time you may feel an unexplainable excitement. These are all signals you should pay attention to. They tell you to slow down your actions and reflect on the meaning of those body signals. The more aware you are of yourself, the sharper your senses become to observe your surroundings. To summarize, the more aware you are, the more you increase your capability (and capacity) as well as your intelligence.

3) Empathy: While clarity of intention and awareness get us onto the path to success, empathy and compassion helps us to gain the support of others. When you begin to see yourself in others and genuinely feel compassion for them, you will find that others reciprocate these feelings. I have found that showing genuine care and affection towards people usually brings positive results. When the situation has conflicts and divisiveness, the attitudes of warmth and affection can diffuse the tension. At that point, it is possible to become open to the idea of further exploration for an amicable solution.

What is empathy? It is like walking in another's shoes. It implies the imaginative act of being the other person. Empathy is the foundation for emotional intelligence. By being kind and empathetic when you could be harsh, you allow yourself to build lasting relationships with your colleagues, employees and customers. Relationship building (a deeper approach than networking) is a key skill that ensures success in the turbulent time in which we live.

The practice of empathy requires demonstrating openness, mutual respect, and trust in our relationships. Deep listening, not just to the words but the meaning behind the words, is the foundation for an empathetic relationship. Sharing from the heart and feeling the pain of the other nurtures relationships. Empathy begets more empathy and is the source of a creative partnership. Of course 'loving kindness' goes a long way to build deep and meaningful friendships and partnerships.

4) Appreciation: While empathy opens the door, appreciation welcomes you in. However empathetic we may be with each other, we are naturally more attuned to finding fault with one other than to appreciating one another as 'gifts.' It may be best to tell the truth that is pleasing to others and withhold what is disliked even if it is the truth. It does not mean that we should lie to please others, but that it may be better for people to find out such truth for themselves. By appreciating and acknowledging others, we increase their state of happiness. Many times they, in turn, reciprocate and contribute happiness back to us and others they touch.

So by letting you know that I appreciate what you have done for me, genuinely and specifically, I let you know that I honor and respect who you are. Appreciating a person and his or her work, boosts morale and amplifies what gave rise to that appreciation in the first place.

You can only appreciate others to the extent that you can appreciate yourself. So appreciation is also about self- acceptance. Most of us rarely appreciate who we are and what we receive. Self-acceptance accelerates the process of self-development.

How do you practice self-acceptance? Make it a ritual every day to find something positive that you have done or some contribution that you have made to others. Even if the work you have done has not yet produced the desired result, appreciate the steps you have taken so far. Similarly, appreciate what others do in their struggle to achieve the results they want. Be authentic when you give such feedback, then you and the other person can discuss how to improve the efforts and get the desired results later on.

Appreciation is not flattery but genuine acknowledgment of a person's contribution. Find something nice to say to every person you come across. (Don't make it up--look for what is nice about them). Look into the others person's eyes and when you do, watch what happens!

5) Stretching beyond your own limits: We operate mostly on autopilot. We become comfortable with the "karma theory" (destiny) and when we fail, we say that it is our fate and move on. While fate may have something to do with what we get, if we don't learn from our failures and take actions that stretch us beyond our comfort zone, we are not using our free will to change the course of our lives. Our intentions must be clear, active, and flexible. In this stretch mode, we become immensely creative and passionate. Why? Without such passion, we would not even attempt to stretch in the first place. Success comes to those who are passionate, intentional, aware of themselves and others, can work with others empathetically, and appreciate who they are. Their willingness to stretch beyond their own perceived limits, of course, requires risk taking.

People are naturally uncomfortable about taking risks and failing because we have a habit of focusing only on the end result. We don't accept or appreciate failure very well. So called 'failures' often create mental blocks in us and boundaries around us. Most of these boundaries are self- imposed. By learning to stretch even though we don't want to, we begin to break through these mental barriers and discover our untapped potential. Again, when we know that we are appreciated and not judged, we have an easier time to stretch beyond our limits.

Curiosity, genuine inquiry (not inquisition), empathy, and appreciation provide the impetus and support for people to stretch beyond their own self-imposed limits and to discover new possibilities. Aspiration and desperation are two good motivators for stretching beyond our limits.

To practice the principle of stretching the limits, find opportunities to learn and be vulnerable. Vulnerability does not mean being weak. It is about being in the state of not knowing and hence being open to learning. Your ability to learn is directly proportional to your ability to be vulnerable. I remembered a situation in which many people from India were talking about a bicycle tour of a nearby village. Most husbands were pretty excited and did not bother to consult their spouses. There was one gentleman who quietly said that it is not possible for him to come because he never learned how to ride a bicycle. He was afraid that people will laugh at him but surprisingly another friend of mine said, he did not know either did not have the courage to say so in front of others. Very quickly, our spouses joined the conversation and we found that only 2 out of 8 spouses knew how to ride a bicycle. What it meant was that the bicycle tour was impractical from the beginning and only because of this courageous gentleman who was willing to be vulnerable we would not found that out soon enough to plan something else!

How to be vulnerable? Be willing to fail, look stupid, and ask questions instead of making assumptions. Practice telling the truth when you are not sure of what the implications may be. Interestingly, you will find out that you are modeling a behavior that leads to stretching the limits. You are creating an environment of nurturing and caring in which other people can also let their guard down and discover themselves to be bigger than they ever imagined.

6) Letting go of what does not work: While the first five principles can get you to the edge of success, success eludes those who do not know when to let go and move on. Habits are difficult to change because we continue to do what we have always done by default and expect different results. By learning to let go of our old mindsets, we can begin to discover new possibilities and new approaches. Letting go does not mean giving up. It means not worrying about the result while continuing to perform the action. That posture gives us the freedom to act in a relaxed, yet focused manner. Many top athletes I interviewed talked about setting high goals and then letting go of their attachment to those goals. This strategy makes them freer to play their natural game and to bring out the best in them.

Letting go is also about flexibility and good judgment. When I know what to let go of and when to do so, I can take responsibility for what I can hold onto and for how long I must do so. I can only take responsibilities for what I have freedom to let go of. I cannot take accountability for any of my actions in which I don't have such freedom.

The cycle of the six principles:

Intention provides the direction and focus for our actions. Awareness gives us the capacity and intelligence to go after our goal. Empathy helps us to build partnerships with others, and appreciation is the key to motivation and productivity. Stretching beyond our perceived limits helps us to grow and meet challenges, and letting go of our attachments assures not only success but accomplishment. Obviously, when we succeed in what we have undertaken, it is time to go back and clarify our intentions all over again as we set new goals.

I believe that practicing these six principles with self-awareness should lead us to not only success, but also self-discovery.

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