

Try Our Exercise:

“Permission to Dream.”

Maryanne Peabody & Larry Stybel

Before you read this article, get a writing instrument and six blank sheets of paper.

Now read the problem below and write your response to the problem:

“Review your life. What are your regrets? “

Write down your regrets on one blank sheet of paper.

When you have finished, read our “Permission to Dream” paper.

**

Palliative care worker Bronie Ware discussed what she had learned in a lifetime of caring for people at the end of their lives. (2015). The number one regret:

“I wish I had the courage to live a life true to myself and not the life others expected of me.”

With that in mind, look at the regrets you listed in the exercise you just completed.

The Three Acts of Your Professional Life:

The late Harvard Business Professor Tony Athos once defined the three acts of a professional life:

Learn the “Game” as It has Been Defined by Others.

Win the “Game” as it has Been Defined by Others.

Define the “Game” You Wish to Play.

Our work often revolves helping them to understand when Act II is over and Act III has yet to start. For example:

The owner of a family business is considering selling the company to a private equity firm. She knows that a change in equity will soon mean that she will be leaving the firm and the CEO role that has defined her professional life.

She may have more money in the bank after the transaction, but how will she define her value in the world in the future?

Another way of phrasing this is to quote from a well Broadway musical, “South Pacific” by Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein:

“You got to have a dream. If you don’t have a dream, how you gonna make a dream come true?”

The Case of Janet, Chief HR Officer:

Janet was Chief HR Officer of a public company. The CEO sent Janet to us to improve her performance as a leader. The CEO's specific complaint was that Janet responded well enough when problems were brought to her attention. But she didn't take initiative.

This perception of Jane reflected also contributed to the negative perception of the HR function within the company as being reactive. It was a company joke that HR is the place where "good ideas go to die."

The CEO's mandate to Janet was "be proactive or be gone."

Janet told us that one of her life's themes was complying with the wishes of others: parents, husband, children, and bosses. She was so good at complying with demands, Janet no longer was sure what she wanted.

The CEO's mandate for leadership created a fascinating problem for Janet:

If our intervention was successful and Janet initiated more ideas at senior management meetings, would she not be complying with the CEO?

But if she did not comply, her job would be in jeopardy.

"Permission to Dream" Exercise:

We asked Janet, age 51, to sit down with a blank sheet of paper and gave her the following instructions:

"You are age 60 and it is a Thursday. You will write an essay about your perfect life on a perfect day. The essay will begin with "I wake up." And when you do, are you in bed alone or with someone? Who is the person?"

“When you get out of bed, your feet will touch the floor. Describe the floor in detail. If it is carpet, what kind of carpet and what color. If it is a wood floor, then what kind of wood? If it is tile, then what color tile?”

“Look out the window. What is the view from your bedroom window?”

“Continue describing this perfect day in your perfect life at age 60 for the next fifteen minutes. “

We left Janet alone in her office to do the exercise.

What Janet Learned from “Permission to Dream:”

Janet read her story to us. She was living in the home she currently lives in and was married to the man she is married to. Her children were off at college and Janet was going to work on her garden.

We commented that the instruction of the exercise required her to assume it was a weekday. was to assume it was Thursday. Janet said she understood. In her perfect world she would continue to be working at age 60 but not as Chief HR Officer. She would be a consultant in HR. There would be days when she would not be working. And this Thursday happened to be one of those days.

The exercise helped Janet to clearly articulate that she wished to have a work life that extended beyond age 65 but that she did not wish to remain as a full-time employee of an organization. She wanted the flexibility of being a consultant.

We could now reframe our leadership intervention in the context of the Chapter Three Janet had defined.

Being a successful consultant required having a track record in leading institutions to new levels of effectiveness. This was in line with her wish

for herself and had nothing to do with the CEO's wishes for Janet. Janet had reframed the intervention using the Permission to Dream exercise.

Her motivation was no longer to comply with the CEO's wishes but to begin creating a reputation for herself that would help her when she became a consultant.

Janet was fortunate: her vision for Chapter Three was not radically different from the life she enjoys today.

Are you in Act II of your life and wanting to be more successful in Act II?

Are you ready to plan for Act III but are still in Act II?

Now You Try It:

"You are age (ten or fifteen years from today) and it is a Thursday. You will write an essay about your perfect life on a perfect day. The essay will begin with "I wake up." And when you do, are you in bed alone or with someone? Who is the person?"

"When you get out of bed, your feet will touch the floor. Describe the floor in detail. If it is carpet, what kind of carpet and what color? If it is a wood floor, then what kind of wood? If it is a tile floor, then what color tile?"

"Look out the window. What is the view from your bedroom window?"

"Continue describing this perfect day in your perfect life in detail for the next fifteen minutes."

References:

B. Ware. AARP. "Five Top Regrets of the Dying." February, 2015.
[2http://www.aarp.org/relationships/grief-loss/info-02-2012/top-five-regre...](http://www.aarp.org/relationships/grief-loss/info-02-2012/top-five-regre...)

###

Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc.

Core services: retained search, leadership coaching, and executive outplacement.

For a free 15-minute consult, contact:

Maryanne Peabody

peabody@stybelpeabody.com

www.stybelpeabody.com

www.boardoptions.com