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## Leaders: Give Yourself “Permission to Dream.”

Are you in Act II or Act III of Your Career?

The late Harvard Business School Professor Tony Athos once said that there are three Acts in a leader’s life:

Learn the Game

Win the Game

Define the Game.

Some of our clients are so good and comfortable at Winning the Game, they do not know when that phase is over and it is time to move to Define the Game. Or they lack the tools to Define the Game they want to play.

One of the tools we use with clients is “Permission to Dream.”

In this article we will show you how to use the tool. We will first illustrate the technique with the case of Janet Doe.

**The Case of Janet Doe, 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 to problems 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 not being proactive enough.   The CEO’s mandate to Janet was “I want more [leadership](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/leadership) from my Chief HR Officer.”  
   
Janet told us that one of her life’s themes was complying with the wishes of others: [parents](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting), 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 just be complying with the CEO?  And if she did not comply, would she not put her job 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, 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 was to assume it was Thursday.  And Thursday is a weekday.  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.

Jane wished to be in Chapter 3 and not Chapter 2.

She was going to define the Game. The new game would be called “Successful HR Consultant.”

**Satisfactory versus Optimal Solutions.**Note that Janet’s Chapter 3 is not radically different from the life she enjoys today.  This is not uncommon as people age.  The alignment of [dreams](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/dreaming) and reality is called “satisficing” versus the more adolescent “optimizing” of an ideal life.

Your completion of the Permission to Dream exercise may find you pleasantly surprised by how far along you are towards living the life that you want to live in the future.

The key is are you in Act II of your life and wanting to be more successful in Act II?

Or are you ready for Act III but are still in Act II?

In our case example, Janet was ready to begin moving towards Act III but had not explicitly articulated it until she wrote down in the “Permission to Dream” exercise.

**Now You Try It:**

At the beginning of this article we asked you to have several sheets of paper.  Now you understand how these blank sheets will be used:  
   
*“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 tile, what is the color?*

*“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.”  
   
When your story is done, share it with someone who shares you love.

Share it with an impartial person you trust who “gets” the world of work.

Let us know how you are doing!

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This article was first published by PSYCHOLOGY TODAY. Each month, Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel provide their perspectives about leadership and career success. To date there have been 1999,000 downloads.

To view the entire PSYCHOLOGY TODAY series:

https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/platform-success

This article also is a chapter in L. Stybel and M. Peabody NAVIGATING THE WATERFALL published by Bruce Farr Creative. It is in the top 25% of the more than one million books sold on Amazon.com. To see reviews of NAVIGATING THE WATERFALL:

<https://www.amazon.com/Navigating-Waterfall-Search-Career-Management-ebook/dp/B01JQZ8PLU/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1478482089&sr=8-1&keywords=navigating+the+waterfall+stybel>

Maryanne Peabody and Larry Stybel are co-founders of Boston-based Stybel Peabody Associates, Inc., an Arbora Global Company.

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