

Living with the Paradox of Perfection...

There's a story about a bridge in Florida that actor Sylvester Stallone blew up in one of his movies. Hundreds of millions of dollars of taxpayer money and tens of thousands of human hours of labor went boom in a few seconds of movie footage.

Building a bridge is tricky business. You start at both ends, and must meet in the middle. This requires precise design, and an exact construction approach that fulfills the specifications of the design. It seems the engineers or the builders of this bridge were one degree off in their specs. When they reached the middle of the bridge, well, you can figure out the rest. What was a coup for Sly, turned out to be a boondoggle for the taxpayers of Florida.

If an airplane gets just one degree off its flight plan, continues on that path and doesn't correct its course, it cannot end up in where it's intending to go. Off course for a good part of the journey, it's been said our Apollo rockets "failed" their way to the Moon. Even NASA is not perfect.

For bridges, tunnels, or buildings, "perfection" is a desirable standard. Would you feel comfortable taking an elevator to the top of the Empire State Building if the elevator shaft were one degree off?

But unlike bridges, building a life is not a perfect science. Life is NOT perfect. WE are not perfect. Yet, research into human values and value judgments yields a remarkable finding: most of us are trying to live life as if it were supposed to be perfect. We strive to live up to perfect ideals and standards, and we can get upset and disappointed when things don't work out perfectly.

The problem with "perfection" is that it is very unforgiving. Just ask the engineers, architects, bridge-builders and taxpayers in Florida. Perfection is a standard that has only two dimensions: it either is, or it isn't. As in all two-dimensional either/or values like right/wrong, good/bad, legal/illegal, black/white, succeed/fail, win/lose, if something is not perfect, then by definition it is IMPERFECT.

There lies the paradox of perfection.

We strive to make things perfect, and build the "perfect" life, livelihood and living. But if you measure life in only two dimensions, anything short of perfect is simply not good enough.

One of the hottest topics today is finding your life purpose. We search as if there is ONE MAGICAL PURPOSE waiting to be discovered. Some people spend their entire lives searching for their "perfect" purpose, waiting until they find it to actually live their lives. Many never do.

Just what if... the real purpose of life was to live simply, and simply live? To BE.

Dr. Robert Hartman, a Nobel Prize nominee in 1973, pioneered the science of Axiology, the study of values and value judgments. He identified (and mathematically proved) that three distinct dimensions of value exist in the world. He called these intrinsic value (the unique and infinitely dimensional world of people, feelings; the SELF); extrinsic value (the multi-dimensional world of doing, the real, tangible and concrete; the SOCIAL); and systemic value (the two-dimensional world of thinking, beliefs, ideas, concepts, rules, laws; the SYSTEM).

He proved that intrinsic value is richer than extrinsic value, and both are more valuable than systemic value. In other words, it is better to love than to serve, and better to serve than to obey. A rich life includes balance in all three dimensions, but intrinsic is more valuable than extrinsic or systemic.

The idea of “perfection” is a systemic value, because it is only two-dimensional. In the conceptual world of thinking, something is either perfect or imperfect. There is no in between, no middle ground.

Here is the trap. If we value things, people and ourselves systemically, we only value these to the degree they are perfect. Anything less than perfect is not good enough. This is a virtually impossible standard to attain, because as human beings we are and never will be perfect.

Yet research shows 80% of people are striving to make things in life perfect (including self, work, relationships, purpose, etc.). Seeking the “perfect” purpose is an exercise in futility, yet many of us are on that path. It’s as if we believe our lives have only one major definite purpose, and the purpose of life is to find our “perfect” purpose. This is why so many of us are stuck on the treadmill of life. We are trying to live up to a standard that simply doesn’t exist in the real world, but only exists in the “ideal” or perfect world of our minds.

We often confuse purpose (a systemic value that, like beliefs and notions, can and does change over the course of life), with BEING (an intrinsic value, our spirit, the essence of who we are that “essentially” doesn’t change). Purpose is NOT an intrinsic value. You are NOT your purpose. You have many purposes, missions, visions, goals, directions, paths to choose; but you are ONLY ONE BEING (spirit, essence, SELF). Who you are is not what you do, what you have, or where you are going. If we associate who we are with what we do, what we have, or where we go, if we are not doing, having or going where we think we should be, where is our value?

I call it a “values inversion” when we make our extrinsic values (work, social acceptance, doing-ness), or our systemic values (purpose, mission, vision, goals, going-ness) more important than our intrinsic value (empathy, compassion, intuition, self-esteem, self-worth, LOVE, BEING-ness).

During my talk, I asked people what’s more valuable to you:

A baby, or a car? They all said a baby.
You, or your money? They all responded ME.
Being right or being happy?

This one was tougher. Intellectually, they all knew being happy was more valuable than being right. But many of us are attached to being right. Being right is another version of being perfect (two-dimensional systemic values, right/wrong, perfect/imperfect). For some, being right is so important they give up being happy in favor of being right.

What’s more valuable, your family or your work? Every one of them answered my family.

Then I asked, “Do you know people who work so much, so long and so hard to achieve “success” in the world, that they have little time for their families?”

This question got them to sit up and take notice. We can all relate to this, because everyone faces the challenge of balancing the three dimensions of life, livelihood and living.

The paradox of perfection is that we think there is some perfect answer out there to life’s challenges, problems and hurdles. We believe there is a perfect life, a perfect job, a perfect purpose.

Our choices and decisions are often ruled by the drive for perfection (rules are another two-dimensional systemic value, you either obey them or you break them). We have a hard time distinguishing between living in the real world and the fantasy of the ideal world. We try to live a perfect life, and for many of us, anything short of perfect is simply not good enough. For some people, anything that is NOT total success is FAILURE.

I asked them, “If you got nine ‘A’s’ and one ‘C’ on a report card, what would get your attention?” They all smiled. They didn’t need to answer that question. They knew that most of them would focus on improving the C rather than celebrating the A’s.

If you’re building a bridge, a tunnel or a skyscraper, aim for perfection. But in building a life, livelihood and living, the drive for perfection becomes a hari-kiri sword we fall on.

There is no perfect job, perfect work, perfect business, perfect location, perfect product or service, perfect employer (employee), perfect customers, perfect house, perfect investment, perfect purpose, perfect body or perfect diet. There are NO perfect parents, perfect children or perfect spouses. Perfection is one of life’s biggest illusions.

IF there IS “perfection” it’s at the spirit level. Intrinsically, there is nothing to become. You already are all you are. BEING and spirit exist in the intrinsic world, perfectly. In the systemic world, we can strive to become “more” or “better” or “perfect” but for most of us, we will never “become” all we think we can become in this lifetime. We are bounded by time, the limits of our physical bodies, and the multitude of desires we have. No matter how many affirmations or mantras I chant I will never dunk a basketball.

That said, aspiring toward high ideals, having a valued mission, and living on purpose are all worthy of our time and vital to a life well lived. One of the purposes of life is to live more fully intrinsically, extrinsically and systemically.

As we begin to pay more attention to our intrinsic value (who we are as human beings), our lives are enriched and our livelihoods are enlivened. We might even earn a more prosperous living. We BE happy, we don’t do or have happy. Happiness is a place we come from, not a place we go to. Understanding and living with the paradox of perfection, we can be happy when things are less than perfect. In fact, we can be happy even when things are far from perfect.

A great question to ask yourself is, “What will I do, NEXT?”

This takes the pressure off making the perfect decision or choice. If what you choose next doesn’t work out, you can make another choice. When we’re not seeking the “perfect” answer to life’s challenges and opportunities, life can be an adventure to be lived, not a concept to be perfected. After all, we are not concepts; we are beings.

This week’s Business Skill for Life:

Live comfortably with the paradox of perfection, and be more conscious of how you strive for perfection. Ask yourself, “What will I do, NEXT?”