

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

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The Only PEP Talk You'll Ever Need

by Dr. Mike Armour

It's easy to lose focus, isn't it? No wonder motivational speaking is a multi-billion dollar industry. We've come to rely on professional motivators to keep us focused on what's important.

So wouldn't it be helpful to be your own built-in motivational speaker? One you can call on anytime, anywhere to refocus? A little internal PEP talk that immediately gets you re-energized?

Well, it's easier than you think. Because if you distill the essence of most motivational speeches, they boil down to a fairly simple formula. It's what I call the PEP principles: Purpose-Excellence-Priorities. These three principles are the pistons that drive the engine of achievement.

The PEP Formula

Whenever I find an organization in disarray, things are usually askew in the PEP formula.

- Either the organization has lost sight of its overarching purpose.
- Or excellence has been sacrificed to mediocre performance (or worse).
- Or priorities are confused or even in conflict with one another.

The same is basically true of lives in disarray.

Purpose

To become refocused and re-energized, we need to be clear on our purpose. That's because human beings are meaning-seeking creatures. As a result, activities must have purpose or they have no meaning. And activity without meaning soon reduces to boredom.

Of all earth's inhabitants, mankind alone is obsessed with attaching meaning to words and events. A child's first and most persistent question is, "Why?" And thus begins a lifelong endeavor to make sense of what is experienced. To find purpose in what we engage.

Unfortunately, it's all too easy to lose sight of our most vital purposes, both as individuals and organizations. I recently was talking with a "temporary CEO" who specializes in turning around financially troubled companies. He typically effects a turnaround in six to eighteen months.

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I asked him if there was any common denominator in the distressed companies he has helped rescue. He immediately answered, "Yes. They all lost sight of their customer and the need to put the customer first."

I'm rather certain that none of these companies ever said that customers were unimportant. In fact, they probably spoke frequently of their "commitment to the customer." But these were only words. Serving the customer was no longer the driving concern of the company.

That's normally what happens when our sense of purpose starts to dissipate. We don't forget our purpose. We simply lose focus on it. And soon other less noble purposes begin to supplant it in our daily priorities.

Excellence

Even where purpose is clear, performance may suffer from a diminished passion for excellence. Settling for mediocrity is all too tempting. Without realizing it, we slip into a routine of doing things only well enough to get by.

During my 35 year career in the Navy and naval reserve, I often heard the phrase, "That's close enough for government work." The remark was often tossed out in jest. But it always concerned me. It suggested that "close enough" was "good enough."

Mediocrity and "close enough" never built a great company, a great non-profit, a great church, a great nation, or a great life. Even when we strive for excellence, we fall short of our goal often enough. Imagine where our average performance falls if we don't even try to excel.

Few things make us feel better about ourselves than knowing we did something well. That we really "aced it." Workers and volunteers want to feel good about their efforts. After all, they are giving a major portion of their lives to it.

When companies and institutions routinely let mediocrity go unchecked, they rob their work force of an opportunity to feel truly good about themselves. And when workers no longer feel good about themselves, absenteeism sets in, productivity drops, and bottom lines go south.

When asked if they have a record of excellence, even mediocre organizations may be able to point to one or two places where they do. But a passion to excel does not permeate the corporate culture.

Even worse, the areas where excellence prevails may not be the ones most critical for success. Imagine the commander of a battleship saying, "Well, I know our gunners are not particularly accurate, but our cooks serve the best meals in the Navy!!"

Excellence alone is not the key. Excellence in the most critical functions is what's crucial. And that leads us to priorities.

Priorities

We all live by priorities. Every day. Whether we set them or not. Because if we don't set our own priorities (and adhere to them), someone else will set them for us. How? Through the world's constant intrusions on our schedule. That's just the way life works.

An ancient book of wisdom says, "The man who multiplies his wealth merely multiplies the number of people eager to spend it for him." The same can be said of our time and energy. There are lots of people eager to tell us how to spend them.

If we are to keep our priorities in balance, we must be absolutely clear about our purpose. That's why the PEP formula puts purpose at the top. Just as "design serves function" in architecture, priorities serve purpose in maintaining achievement and excellence.

Near the end of his life the pioneering psychiatrist Carl Jung noted that the majority of his patients suffered from no diagnosable neurosis or psychosis. They simply lacked a unifying purpose at the core of their existence around which to structure health-building priorities.

Clarity of purpose alone does not guarantee balanced priorities. Setting and holding to priorities calls for constant discipline. Yet, if priorities are to align and reinforce one another, they must be focused on a singular outcome, which is defined in our sense of purpose.

Assessment

When I walk into a troubled organization, I immediately start weighing my observations against the PEP formula. Are purposes absolutely clear, not just for the entire company, but for every major component within it? Is a passion for excellence everywhere apparent? Are priorities focused and aligned? I'm yet to find a troubled company where the answer to all of these questions was "yes."

I do much the same thing when coaching clients are looking for greater fulfillment in life. I ask them to evaluate themselves against the PEP formula. Almost inevitably they isolate their disillusionment in the realm of lost purpose, settling for mediocrity, or confused priorities.

When things fall into disarray for you or your organization, you're likely to find the same root causes. Just pull out the PEP formula and figure out where you need to retool and refocus. It's amazing how quickly we can be re-energized when we get back to these basics.

Condition your inner voice to remind you constantly of the PEP formula. Purpose-Excellence-Priorities. Then you can forego motivational tapes and speakers. The tape you are playing inside will be the only PEP talk you'll ever need.

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